

*Events in the life of  
Saint John Baptist de La Salle*



**WEB  
OF  
PROVIDENCE**

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## Introduction

These accounts of events from the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the patron saint of teachers, are intended as tools for deepening our understanding of his message and, at the same time, for reflecting on our own life. His life journey and trust in Divine Providence give us a context for looking at the influences affecting us and shaping the course of our journey towards God.

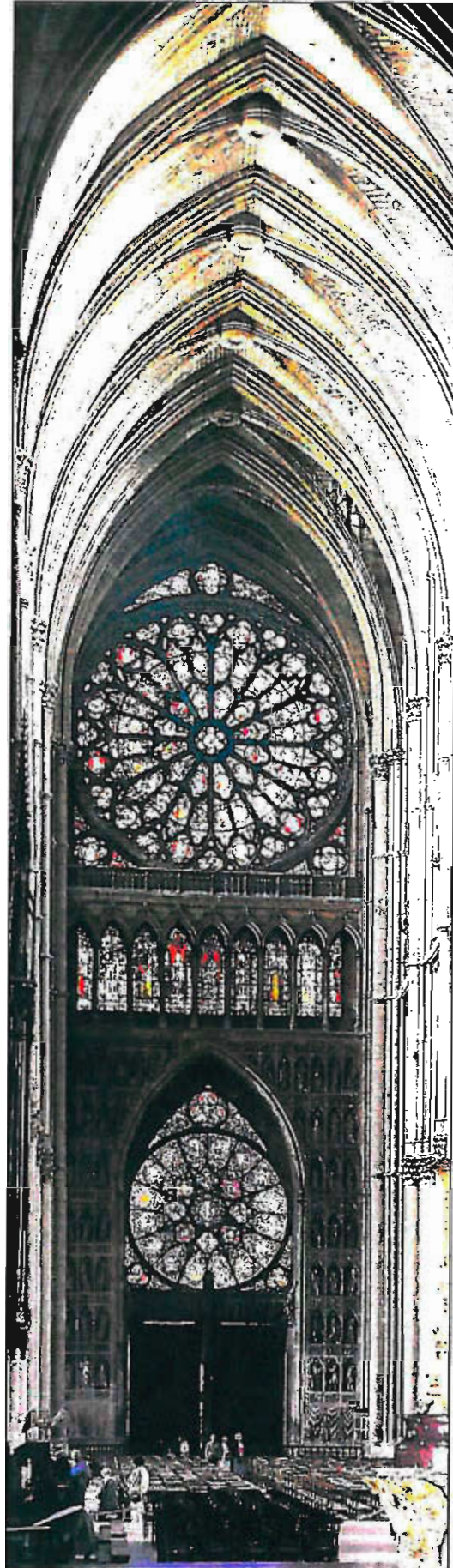
The episodes presume a basic knowledge of the life of St. de La Salle and a desire to devote time to reading and reflection in order to come closer to God. In the treatment of his life I have attempted to situate events within a frame of time or place or mood which would bring out something of their underlying significance. This sometimes means using a particular angle of interpretation as well as a degree of imagination. But this has been done in order to 'open up' his life rather than close off alternative readings or personal insights into his spiritual journey. I have, nevertheless, aimed to be faithful to the facts recounted in the biographies as well as in any historical details used.

The ideas for Reflection and Prayer are intended as possible ways into using the texts. They are intended as a flexible tool and can be added to or redrafted according to the user's needs. I would like to thank all those Brothers who have willingly shared their experience with me and given me inspiration as well as critical comment on the development of these texts

The notes have been kept to a minimum. For anyone wishing to deepen their knowledge, references are given in the back to appropriate sections in the modern biographies. Some brief comments on prayer have also been added but for anyone who would like more on this topic, the notes give some suggestions.

May the Lord be with you in your reading.

John Deeney FSC  
Rome 1997





**O**n the left bank of the Seine, in a populous part of Paris, the seminary of St. Sulpice was a large enough building to insulate its inhabitants from the noise and movement of the city. Dim, quiet corridors threaded the interior of the building. Outside a fine white dust descended with the summer heat as the stone masons worked on the new parish church.

It was towards the end of the morning and Monsieur Tronson was still at his desk. A large tome containing sermons of the Fathers of the Church was open on his desk and a half-filled sheet of paper lay in front of him. He had put down his quill pen for the moment and was reflecting on how to finish off his lecture to the seminarians, a harder task now, towards the end of this summer term. The gentle tap on the door brought his mind back to his surroundings. The person was that of John Baptist de La Salle, one of the group of seminarians he had undertaken to guide. The young man's normally happy expression was strained and he held a paper to his chest in an abnormally tight grip.

"Sir, I have received news this morning of the death of my mother ...."

With tact and sympathy, Monsieur Tronson talked his student through the painful trauma of the news. The closeness of mother and son was so evident that it brought tears to the older man's eyes as well. How fortunate at a time like this that the bedrock of faith was there for support against the shock.

"You must go to the chapel where it is quiet, and there give thanks to God for the holy life your mother lived and for the part which she played in leading you to Him. And when you pray for her soul, remember the infinite mercy of God who is Father to us all."

When John Baptist had left, Tronson did not return to his lecture. He remembered the deaths of his own relatives. Age helped one to gain a perspective on death, he reflected, but how anyone could truly cope with death without the support of Christian belief surpassed his imagining. All the efforts, joys and hopes of life suddenly snuffed out, lost forever? He could not feel that human life could be so lacking in meaning. Especially when it came to the death of a loved parent. The memories of all that sympathy and love lavished on the children. The heartache of knowing that a mother's support was no longer there, that there would be no more occasions to show appreciation or return that love....

His eyes turned to the crucifix on his desk. The heartache of love, the need to trust in the Father — Jesus knew all that, through it he had transcended the darkness of death. Monsieur Tronson closed his eyes and prayed for John Baptist in his time of trial. Prayed that he would hope and trust in God wherever he might

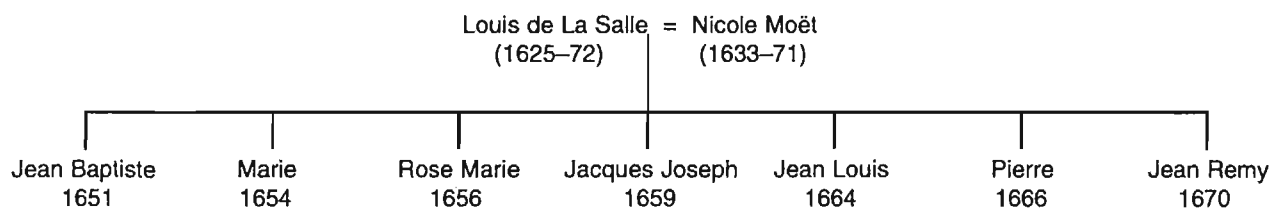


Canon La Salle, aged about 18.  
(This painting is preserved at Hôtel de La Salle, Reims.)

be led.

It was less than a year later that the news of the death of his father, Louis de La Salle, reached John Baptist at the seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris. The death had come after a sudden, short illness that just gave Louis time to amend his will. His father had already been buried before the news reached Paris. The shock was again severe but this time there were evident consequences for John Baptist. At 20, he was now the oldest of the still large family and would have to become involved in their affairs in Rheims.

It was Holy Week when he received the heavy news from Rheims. The days of retreat at St. Sulpice were difficult for him as he signed off at the seminary and at the Sorbonne and prepared to leave the capital. He set off for Rheims after a subdued Easter and walked the 160 kilometres in five days. His mind must have churned over the situation during the hours of walking through the spring countryside and everything must have appeared so different in these new circumstances. The strong call he had felt to become a priest and the intensely spiritual experience of St. Sulpice were suddenly under threat. It was not as if he had changed:



things had changed around him and he felt half lost. What would lie in store for him at Rheims? What was God saying in all of this? Questions he could not answer, events he could not control.

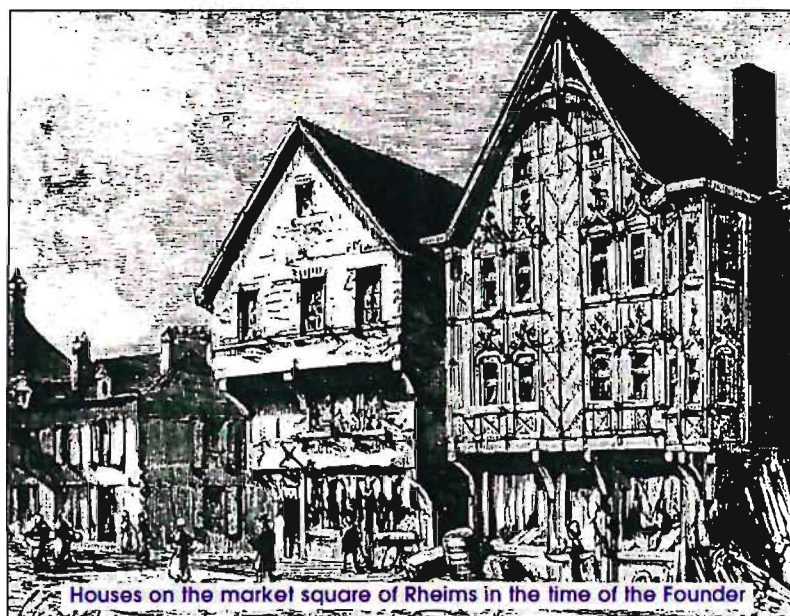
The upset in his life was greater even than expected. His father had changed his will to appoint John Baptist as guardian of the children. There could be no doubt that his studies for the priesthood would have to be suspended indefinitely. His role would become that of father to most of the children and administrator of the family possessions. He would have the support of other older relatives to help him develop the skills he would need for this, but it would occupy the greater part of his time. After the ordered life of the seminary he would now have to develop his own pattern for living. Being free to choose, he would have to decide on priorities: balance his own inclinations and his duties as head of family and canon of the cathedral.

\* \* \*

He regretted leaving the seminary. Later in life de La Salle's opinion of St. Sulpice was recorded: "He always loved that training school of evangelical labourers and never spoke of it except with the warmest expressions of esteem and respect." Having been plucked out of such a congenial environment, John Baptist seems to have suffered from an uncertainty

about God's call to him. The path which had seemed so clear was encumbered by problems which he was incapable of removing. If God wanted him to be ordained, why these obstacles, the death of both parents and the acquisition of demanding responsibilities? The doubts were very real to him. Fr. Nicolas Roland writing, it is thought, to de La Salle says the following: "I am very sorry to hear of the state you are in ... Do you not see that it is the devil who is trying to overwhelm you and that through these persistent temptations and fears that he sends you, he is trying to push you to leave the service of God?"

With the support of such spiritual men as Roland and through his own persistence in prayer and work for others, de La Salle found the strength and insight to cope with his situation and at the same time to continue to grow in his understanding of God. In retrospect, he may have come to see that these two strands formed one line that, as he followed it, developed in him strengths and qualities which he would use constantly over the course of his life. Far from being abandoned, God was guiding him along a path of rich practical and spiritual experience, though it may not have felt like it at the time. He was to write later when he could see what had occurred: "God, who conducts all things with wisdom and gentleness ... (worked with me) in an almost imperceptible manner over a long period of time ..."



Houses on the market square of Rheims in the time of the Founder



## A method of working with the text

It would be possible to use the text itself to work with a group or individuals by picking out certain aspects for discussion. The talk could centre on how these elements can be seen in the life of De La Salle but also on what kind of echo they have in the life of people nowadays and in our own experience in particular.

A section is reproduced here as an example with certain phrases highlighted as a lead-in to discussion.

'With tact and sympathy, Monsieur Tronson talked his student through the painful trauma of the news. The closeness of mother and son was so evident that it brought tears to the older man's eyes as well. How fortunate at a time like this that the **bedrock of faith** was there for support against the shock.'

"You must go to the chapel where it is quiet, and there give thanks to God for the holy life your mother lived and for **the part which she played in leading you to Him**. And when you pray for her soul, remember **the infinite mercy of God who is Father to us all**."

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## For prayer and reflection: 1      Lasallian Family

- As Christians, we turn to God in faith during those difficult moments in life. John Baptist de La Salle turned to God to seek an understanding of the turn of events in his life. In what difficult moments of your life have you turned to God in search of guidance? How has your faith sustained and guided you through difficult times?
- De La Salle looked for support from spiritual men such as Roland to help him understand the movement of God in his life. Who do you look to for guidance and support? In your life, which people have helped you to see where God was calling you?
- Through these difficult life events, De La Salle continued growing in his understanding of God. How has your understanding of God grown in recent years? How have your life experiences enabled you to grow in your understanding of God?
- The death of his parents and the leaving of his priestly studies at St. Sulpice caused De La Salle to doubt his vocation to priestly service. We often become discouraged when obstacles appear in our path. How can doubts and obstacles help us to clarify our call by God to service?
- We often have to live in acceptance of God's will before we start to understand his purposes. Events such as sickness, loss, or failure can easily lead us to question our faith. Select some event which has been difficult for you and pray for the grace to see it as being God's will and as something from which the Lord can draw good even if we are unable to see that side of things.
- It is easy to feel that we do not have the gifts which are required for the work to which the Lord has called us. In one sense that is true, and God likes us to be aware of our weaknesses and to rely on his strength. But it is also too easy to undervalue the

talents with which God has gifted us. Write down some of the talents which you discern in yourself and thank God for them in your prayer. Some of the less obvious gifts, such as that of peacemaker, encourager, leader are some of the most important.

- De La Salle had to leave the seminary to look after his younger brothers and sisters. This prepared him for dealing with young people later on in his life. Can you identify how your family life or education has contributed to your desire to be involved with young people?
- In chapter 10 of the gospel of Mark, a blind beggar calls out to Jesus and the more people tell him to quieten down the more he shouts for attention. Jesus cures his blindness and says: "Go, your faith has saved you."

One lesson from this incident is that if we want something badly enough we will have to keep on asking for it. Probably the more we ask the more we come to desire and value what we are asking for. If our work is something which requires a sense of vocation, this is something that we should continually ask for in our prayers instead of taking it for granted or as something given just once way back in our past.

- The family of John Baptist de La Salle obviously encouraged his desire to become a priest. Nevertheless, he had to leave behind this family which he loved to go and study in Paris. A few years later on in his life he had an even more radical parting from the social milieu of his family and friends. Are there things which we have had to leave in order to follow God's call? Was that a difficult process? Are there still things in our life which tie us down and that we ought to be trying to leave behind in order to be fully available to God?
- *'Glory be to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.'* (Eph 3:21)

**I**n winter, the frozen winds from Siberia sometimes sweep across the Baltic sea, over the lowlands of Germany and Belgium and into the rolling countryside of Champagne in northern France. It is a wind which even today drives the people of northern Europe to find shelter from the chill and to cosset themselves until the cold abates. Such a wind as this was blowing one night in 1680, carrying flecks of snow that stung where they hit exposed hands or faces. There were few people outdoors on that particular evening and, on one lonely road leading towards Rheims, there was only the one traveller, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, cannon of Rheims cathedral and leader of a community of teachers working in the charity schools of the city.

The weather was unsuitable for travelling, but being on horseback and knowing the way, he anticipated little problem apart from the discomfort of the cold; an inconvenience with which he felt well able to cope. The wind buffeted both horse and rider. The horse kept its head down as it plodded steadily through the layer of snow, slipping occasionally on the frozen ruts. Its mane was already frosted with ice and the wind whipped the warm breath out of its nostrils. The rider had his hat pulled down and cloak turned up against the wind. He wrapped his cloak over his frozen hands where he grasped the reins. The evening closed in. Where black woods had earlier stood out against the white fields there was now just a dense, overall gloom. The snow was thicker too. The wind had totally effaced any earlier tracks and was piling the snow into drifts that loomed suddenly out of the dark.

The way became less certain but there was no question of stopping, no help, no shelter. The horse made its way around the edge of a large drift then suddenly lurched and snorted in fright. Its rear hoofs slipped on the edge of a steep slope and it bucked, pawing frantically to find a grip. Taken unawares, the rider slipped sideways. His numbed hands lost their grip on the reins and he tumbled off the horse and down the slope just as the animal succeeded in regaining its footing. The snow cushioned his fall but the shock of icy water made him gasp. It wasn't deep. He scrambled to his feet as the thin ice crackled around him. He sank into soft mud and the water reached above his knees. The water was black around where he had fallen but there was little else to see apart from the snowbanks rearing into the darkness above him.

He had to climb out. His reaction was immediate, slowed only by the cold and the heaviness of his soaked clothes. But underneath the snow the slope was steep and slimy. His feet slipped back down into the water and his hands clawed at cold clay. He tried again. He broke more ice and moved along to a different spot. Everything was

icy, nothing was solid. Freezing mud and ooze and soft snow. The cold in his legs and hands was biting into the bone. He could hardly grip any more. The slope was scoured now with muddy trails where he had failed to get out. He shouted until the effort and the cold hurt his lungs. The wind whipped the shouts away into the blackness.

He hitched his wet cloak up over his arms and back and tucked his hands against his chest. His feet were beyond help. His plight was desperate. He had done all he could. He, John Baptist de La Salle, not yet thirty years old, only two years a priest, would be found the next day covered in mud and snow and frozen to death. The desperation of his plight had not provoked him to panic. He now deliberately set his thoughts in order. His family, the teachers and schools, the Sisters of the Child Jesus, his fellow canons — so many things to be done, responsibilities he would have to abandon to God's Providence. He shivered and staggered and leaned against the snowy wall. Inwardly he was vividly aware of himself in the Lord's presence. He put all his relationships, his hopes and his work into God's hands — hands that he knew would cherish and shelter everything with their warmth and love. He put his exhausted self and body into those same hands, telling the Lord that if he was calling him this night then he was pleased to give himself willingly. If the Lord still had a particular work for him to do, then he would continue to dedicate his life to that work as best he was able. His strength was almost gone. He knew that only the Lord's hand could save him now.

He brought his own hands back out into the biting wind and freed one foot from the mud. Slowly he felt for a hold on the slope. Both feet out of the water, hands sunk into thick, chalky clay above his head. A small shrub with a stem hardly large enough to grasp. He seemed to be outside himself, watching this weak body reaching up for another hold, still clinging to the slope in spite of the odds. His hat had gone and the snow blew in his eyes. He could never say how long it took or how he reached the lip of the drop. What he recalled vividly was the immense effort it took to haul himself onto level around and the tearing pain in his abdomen as he lay face down in the snow. And then the snuffling of his horse as it bent its head towards him.

\* \* \*

**I**t was an episode which de La Salle recounted often enough in the course of his life. The rupture which remained with him was a tangible reminder of the time when he knew that the Lord had saved him from certain death. In times of difficulty it was a reminder that the Lord had saved him because he had work for him to do. Work which he would put all his efforts into doing but which would only succeed if the hand of the Lord was with him.



Within a few months he had accepted to take the poor schoolmasters into his own house and undertaken to form them for their task as Christian teachers. That was a decision which was to lead him into his life's work of establishing the institute of the Brothers.

He was always able to thank God for the understanding and trust which he had developed through his close encounter with death. At the end of his life he again had to entrust his fragile society of Brothers of the Christian Schools to those loving hands of God to take it where he could no longer go. The peace which he felt in God's presence was with him he knew from his experience that

his Lord could be trusted.

De La Salle shares with St. Paul the distinction of having a significant encounter with God after a fall from a horse. We are not so likely to have had that expedience, yet God has been present in our lives and especially apparent at certain times or in certain events. We need to reflect on our life in this context so that we do not miss the guiding light of God's spirit. Each of those moments is like the 'pearl of great price' which, once we have grasped it, we should hold on to at all costs. Such insights help to sustain us in times of doubt or difficulty just as they sustained De La Salle in the ups and downs of his own life.

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## Prayer and reflection: 2

- It is usually helpful to look back over our life occasionally to note those times when God seemed especially close to us. We can ask ourselves:

What did a particular experience teach us?

Have we made an effort to keep alive the memory of any important intervention of God in our life?

- De la Salle consistently promoted the practice of recalling that we live continually in the presence of God:

*'You ought to nourish yourself with God by thinking of His holy presence as often as you possibly can. That which constitutes the life of the saints is precisely their continual attention to God, and this also should form the life of those who ... seek only to accomplish His holy will, to love Him, and to make others love Him.'*

(Meditation 67)

We should try and find ways of putting this into practice in our lives, maybe finding particular times or places where we can find brief spaces of increased awareness.

- Difficult times in life can block out the knowledge that God loves each one of us always. Meditating on this love of God can help us to recall it when we are under pressure. Psalm 138 dwells on God's creative presence around us. In chapter 15 of the gospel of John, Jesus says 'I am the vine, you are the branches', indicating how we live intimately united to him.
- We can pray for enlightenment regarding God's call for us by using a simple phrase repeated slowly: 'Lord, what do you want to accomplish in me?'
- De La Salle expected God to manifest himself in the ordinary events of life — things heard or seen, actions or accidents, encounters with others. Have there been any things in our day or our recent life in which we have been able to notice a sign from God?
- A simple offering of our life, our work and our talents to God can become a prayer of real depth and commitment.

### St Remi

The early light of a summer morning gradually softened the shadows inside the abbey church of St. Remi. The rounded columns along one side of the nave glowed warm as they picked up the primrose tint of the dawn sky. Behind the high altar, the sculpted figures on the tomb of St. Remi seemed to stir and rise as their shadows brought them into greater relief. The sole living figure inside that great church remained perfectly still. He was kneeling, head bowed, wrapped in a dark cloak. It would have been difficult to tell if he were asleep or deep in prayer such was his stillness. After some while, however, he raised his head and adjusted his eyes to the light. He focused on the cross behind the high altar and spoke a few words to the figure of Jesus. He stood, moving stiffly at first, genuflected slowly, then stepped thoughtfully under the vaulting of the side-aisle and paced down the length of the worn flagstones toned with light filtered through stained glass windows. He was tired but his mind was clear about what God wanted of him and his purpose still firm.

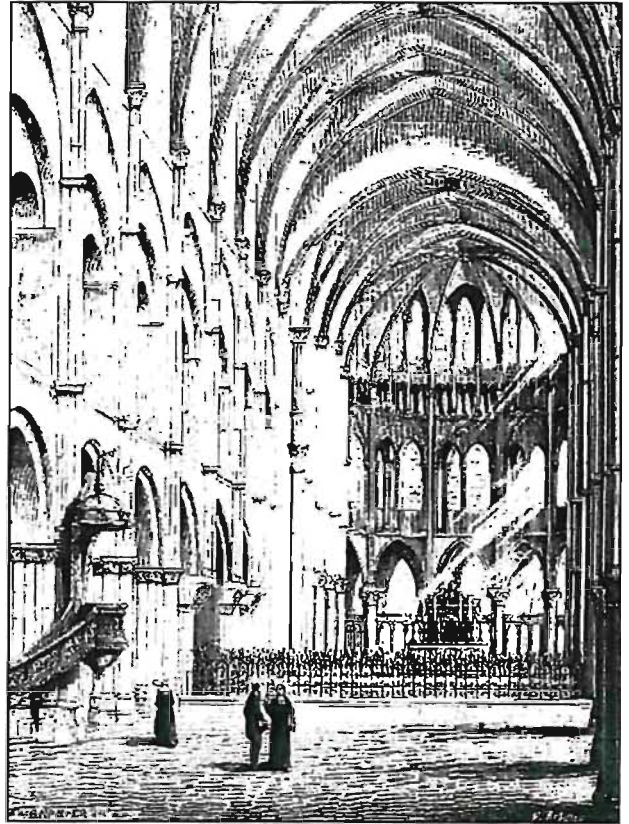
The grind and crack of a lock turning echoed under the arches and disturbed his peace. Light flooded in as the sacristan pushed open the heavy door. He greeted M. de La Salle in a low voice as the priest left the abbey and turned his steps towards the centre of Rheims.

### The Palais du Tau

Even lunch had not improved the Archbishop's mood over-much. The fuss of organising his imminent return to Paris and disposing of outstanding business before he left had made him impatient and unsettled and had had a pronounced effect on those around him. The work was dense and the summer's heat was heavy. "Enough!" He dropped a sheaf of papers onto his desk and wiped his forehead with a white cloth without succeeding in wiping away the frown that overhung his somewhat fleshy face. He pushed his chair back and stood up, tucking his linen collar back into place and rearranging his episcopal attire. He stood by the open window to catch the warm breeze that wafted in from the square. He half-turned suddenly, clicked his fingers and beckoned his secretary over to the window. "Who is that man there, the one just turning the corner of the cathedral? Do you know?"

"Ah, yes, your Lordship, I see him. It is, I think, Canon Monsieur de La Salle, is it not?"

"I thought so," muttered Le Tellier. "What is he still



Interior of the Abbey church of St Remi, Rheims

doing here at this time? I had them turn him away this morning when he wanted to see me."

They both watched the dark figure start to move across the cobbled space towards the Archbishop's palace.

"Surely not again!" Le Tellier shook his head. "The man is like a spring breeze. Never rough. He just nudges and tugs and swirls around and catches you when and where you least expect him till he wears you down with whatever it is he wants."

"Just what we could do with, a spring breeze," ventured the secretary.

Le Tellier's sharp, dark eyes studied his companion's unexpressive face for a moment. "Have him admitted if he asks for me. I don't want him following me to Paris again."

De La Salle's presence, oddly enough, had somewhat refreshed the Archbishop. It wasn't the usual petty complaints. He had spoken persuasively and cogently of all the factors which were calling him to resign his canonry and commit himself to the work of the teachers and the schools for the poor. The message had been put across with a subtle power that half-mesmerised him, but it had all the strangeness of a communication from



some newly discovered world, a world he found difficult to fathom. That a man should want to leave a secure, well-endowed post that he could hold for life was baffling enough, but that the man wanted to live and work with the poor and survive on a pittance was ... well, it was madness! But Le Tellier knew his value and was too intelligent to believe that the man was mad. There was a peace about him but a fire in his eyes and a sense of purpose and coiled energy as well — like a loaded crossbow, he thought to himself, stillness just waiting for the right touch.

“Disquieting,” he said, continuing his brief reverie out loud; a comment that was none too clear to the other three persons in the room, not surprisingly since it mostly described the effect that the discussions had had on the Archbishop himself

“So, Canon Philbert, this resignation has your carefully considered support, does it?”

“I have given my opinion, my Lord, and you know that Monsieur de La Salle does have a brother to whom he could pass on the canonry.” Le Tellier’s jewelled finger tapped the carved arm of his chair and the cushions sighed slightly as he leaned back. Suddenly his own energy and a touch of the day’s impatience returned. He leaned forward decisively;

“Well, if that’s what you both think, I wash my hands of the affair. He can resign his canonry and give it to whomsoever. The business is settled. Tomorrow I shall be away to Paris and you will have to deal with the consequences.”

The relief in the room was palpable, like a physical tension released or a touch of evening freshness.

### The rue Neuve<sup>1</sup>

The weariness caused by the long night, the hot day, the hours of daylight prayer in the cathedral and the ordeal with the Archbishop dropped from de La Salle like a laden sack. He left the cathedral and palace

behind him and set off towards the rue Neuve. The heat of the day was beginning to fade and the street was alive with movement and gossip. Grubby children chased each other in between adults and down alleys; people seated at their open windows called down to friends; the taverns swallowed their clientele. De La Salle noticed none of the detail: he hardly felt the cobbles under his feet. His heart was singing songs of thanksgiving. After months of negotiation and struggle the right catch had been released and he was now freed and speeding in the direction in which God had been calling him. And as for his Brothers, how this would strengthen them now that his attachments and privilege were gone and he was going to be united with them in their reliance on God’s providence! The familiar tall, timbered house rose up above him and he paused on the step to bang the dust and debris off his shoes and compose himself somewhat for his entrance.

Nicolas, Jean-François, Jean-Maurice and the others crowded round to hear his story. Theirs’ was a stunned delight. The full implications were difficult to absorb but it was de La Salle’s own almost ecstatic joy which caught their hearts and drowned their thoughts. Their smiles and words could not adequately release the emotions of the moment and it was de La Salle who led them into the small, simply-furnished chapel to sing the Te Deum, that soaring hymn of praise and thanks to God for his goodness and greatness:

*Te Deum laudamus, te Dominum confitemur.*

We praise you, O God:  
we acclaim you as the Lord ...

Everlasting Father,  
All the world bows down before you.  
All the angels sing your praise ...

In you, Lord, we put our trust:  
we shall not be put to shame.

## For prayer and reflection: 3

- When he encountered problems in his life or work, De La Salle spent greater amounts of time in prayer. He took literally the words in the gospel:

*Ask, and it will be given to you;  
search and you will find;  
knock and the door will be opened to you.*

We can examine our own ways of acting when we encounter difficulties. Do we try and solve them by ourselves or do we seek the Lord's help? We also need to be persistent in prayer if we are really serious in what we are asking.

The answers we get to our prayers do not always give us what we want or expect. What reaction do we have when an answer doesn't please us? Are we able to accept God's choice for us and even thank him for it?

- De La Salle found great joy in the life and work of the early community. The obstacles he encountered never prevented him from seeing the blessings which they were also given and thanking God for them.

We could draw up a list of some of the blessings in our life and make a prayer of thanks for them. We have such major items as family, friends, education, our gifts or our health or faith. We also have many lesser things which we enjoy and which we often take for granted.

- In the Acts of the Apostles it is recorded that people

said of the early Christians: 'See how they love one another.' In one of his meditations, De La Salle says: 'This union (between Brothers) should be so close as to resemble that which exists between the three Divine Persons ...'

We can usefully reflect on those different areas of community to which we belong, such as family, work, church, and see what attitude and contribution we bring to each.

- When he thought of leaving his canonry, De La Salle wrote: 'Though I entered through the right door it seems now that God is opening it so that I should leave.' Do you see any situation, even a positive one, where God is calling you to move on to something else?

- Find a psalm or prayer of thanksgiving that appeals to you. You might consider using this several times in order to find its deepest meaning.

- A prayer of John Baptist de La Salle:

*Accept, I pray you, O my God,  
the thought and the affection that I have for you,  
as my thanks for the grace which you are giving me  
of thinking of you at this moment  
since this is something I can offer you  
which is most pleasing to you.*

(EMMP 149 D)



*Letter from Father Leonard de Sainte Catherine to Father Le Gall*

Paris, 1694.

My dear Sir,

I have, as you know, a great interest in the persons and events of our time, so I shall be able to answer your enquiry with as much information as you shall require. M. de La Salle is not a personal acquaintance, although I have encountered him on occasion, but it is not difficult to gather opinions and anecdotes on his singular path through life.

You know how he arrived in Paris some few years ago with a number of his disciples and began to organise free Christian schools for the poor. For certain persons this would seem to be grounds for serious criticism. That he is a well-born gentleman of a certain influence living in poor circumstances has upset some clerics who do not have any inclination to live in this fashion. M. de La Salle is not easily swayed by reproaches on this subject and I have heard him described as 'headstrong', 'stubborn', and 'excessively strict', as well as 'admirable', 'saintly' and 'inspiring'.

If it were only among such clerics that he caused upset, then he would still be able to conduct his work in relative peace. However, it did not take long before his schools had such an influence in the parish of St. Sulpice that the schools of the Writing Masters were seen to be less attractive to some of those who had once patronised them. The Writing Masters have, since then, been involved in continual opposition to the schools of his community. Already four years ago one of his schools was closed and all the furnishings confiscated by order of the courts and it has been with some difficulty that his Brothers have continued to operate.

My assessment of the above situations leads me to believe that his way of life and his conduct of his community of teachers possess a quality which make him difficult to ignore. One's response to his example depends more, I think, on one's own interior dispositions than on the undoubted goodness of his actions. Hence the variety of opinion on his subject. He has the reputation of entrusting his work to providence, as I shall endeavour to show, and has not been discouraged by the difficulties which have presented themselves to him.

I am able to give a more personal testimony to satisfy your curiosity about his community's way of life as I have visited their house at Vaugirard, just outside the city and have been able to speak to some of the members of his community and priests who have stayed

there. This house was once a fine residence but it is now as austere a monastery as you could wish. The Brothers sleep on planks covered by thin, straw pallets and have only a simple blanket and coarse sheet against the cold. They have to place their beds to avoid the leaks and away from the windows where the rain or snow blows in.

You know the hardship, the cold and the famine which this last winter brought to our land. Food was so difficult to obtain for the house — those who carried it out from the city were liable to be robbed on the way — that the community had to move into the city for some months. Since that time they have returned to Vaugirard and I have recently seen that their extraordinary life continues as before.

I am sure that you have visited certain places or shrines that you sense are 'holy' as if they were steeped in prayer or filled with light. I was struck by this sensation when I visited the house. Despite its dilapidated state it is quiet and orderly, amazingly peaceful and happy.

The Brothers are thin and poorly clad but behave with courtesy and dignity and have a clear sense of purpose. I entered the house preparing to feel sorry for them but left envying them their spiritual richness. I must confess to feeling a certain emptiness in myself when I returned to my own dwelling and reflected on my experience of that day.

I observed Monsieur de La Salle walking in the garden. He is good-looking and well-built and is clearly held in great affection by his community. They are also inspired by his presence and his example and his legendary devotion to prayer. This I could quite understand after hearing some of the stories which they had to tell. One will serve as an example.

At the time the Brothers were moving into the house, the day was approaching when the carters transporting their furniture and those who were repairing the floor would require their pay. But there was no money. The bursar went to Monsieur de La Salle in a panic, not knowing how he was going to deal with these workers who would require immediate payment. De La Salle told him that he had no money either and instructed him to pray about it. On the following day, when the money was to be paid, he got the same calm answer but he was sufficiently agitated to reply that Monsieur de La Salle should pray as well since the situation was so grave. Shortly after that the bursar had the idea of looking again in a cupboard which had been standing open outside for several days. He was overwhelmed to find in there forty crowns, just what he needed to pay the workers.<sup>2</sup> Such events as this are not uncommon and it convinces the Brothers that they are

indeed sustained by a most attentive providence.

I trust that my account will give you sufficient idea of what is happening with this community. My encounters with it have not left me unmoved. I am most pleased to say that I believe it to be a movement which is capable of being a great force for good in our land. We

shall, no doubt, see how it develops over the years.

Yours in Our Lord,

Father Leonard de Sainte Catherine



The country house of Vaugirard which became the second cradle of the Institute.  
The Founder himself lived here from 1691 to 1698, a period which corresponds to what he called  
the "Society of the Christian Schools"



## For prayer and reflection: 4

- The establishments that De La Salle was opening in Paris were 'free, Christian schools' for the children of the poor. He was very conscious of this as a part of the mission of the Church. He wanted the schools, wherever possible, to be closely linked with the action and teaching of the Church in spite of the difficulties caused him by certain sections of the Church officials.

You could reflect on your own sense of being part of the mission of the Church to bring the 'good news' to the world and to minister to those in need.

You could try listing your own positive experiences of 'Church'. Is there more that you could gain from or contribute to your church community, recognising that the two elements are intertwined?

- Vaugirard has remained legendary amongst the Brothers because of the austerity of the years there. De La Salle remarked: 'Our Brothers will survive so long as they are poor. They will lose the spirit of their vocation as soon as they start procuring for themselves the unnecessary commodities of life.'

We all have things which take us away from what God calls us to do or to be. We should try not to accumulate goods over and beyond our real needs or become

obsessed with some peripheral aspect of living. We should examine our lifestyle prayerfully and ask for the Lord's help to see which things are obstacles to us in our relationship with him.

Family fast days provide a very practical way of starting on a simple lifestyle in a way that will benefit the less well off.

- The behaviour and way of life of the Brothers at Vaugirard made an impact on the local people and also attracted more young men to join the community. What witness does my life give of the Christianity that I profess? As G.K. Chesterton said. 'If I were to be accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me?'

- *Lord,  
you have enriched our lives in many ways.  
Give us each day  
the wisdom to recognise  
which things are important and which are not.  
Show us how best  
to use the time and talents you have given us.  
Help us to use all opportunities wisely  
that we may give in service to others  
the good gifts we have received from you.*

**The Eve of Pentecost, May 1694.**

*"The aim of this Society is to give a Christian education to children and it is for this purpose that the Brothers keep schools, so that having the children under their care from morning until evening, they may teach them to live good lives by instructing them in the mysteries of our religion and..."*

The writing was slow work. He was copying from a paper that already contained corrections and he was changing more as he went. The trouble with writing Rules was that you had to produce guidelines which would be valid for now and for years to come. Once they were written down and accepted, it wouldn't do to have to make lots of changes and thus undermine their value in the Brothers' eyes. Nor would it do to include things which the Brothers were not going to be really committed to practising. The Rules were a project which De La Salle wanted very much to put before the Brothers, but it was a demanding task. He found, in fact, that he was spending more time thinking and praying about these Rules than he was taking over the actual writing — and that was proving slow enough.

It was almost time to break for community prayers before lunch. He moved to the open window where the light was streaming in from outside. At least things were looking up after that terrible winter, and the Vaugirard garden in late spring was a sight to lift the Brothers' spirits. The twelve principal Brothers would soon all be gathered for the feast of Pentecost and the start of their time of retreat and consultation. De La Salle felt somewhat nervous, if that was the right word, about the week ahead. He did not feel too clear about what path the gathering was going to take. So much would depend on the reactions of the group. Not that he should be worrying; it was no coincidence that they were starting on the feast of the Holy Spirit and they would consciously make all their decisions under his influence. That was a comfort to him.

*"When the Spirit of truth comes  
he will lead you to the complete truth ... (John 16:13)*

One just had to move forward in trust, even into areas of darkness. In the grip of that icy winter it had been difficult to imagine what spring would be like — but now there was blossom in the garden and the birds were singing, oblivious of their ordeal. If we enjoy this repeated miracle of nature, he thought to himself, we

can expect even greater transformations in human affairs when they are placed in God's hands. It was true, as well, that he was eager to share this week with his Brothers. He turned and crossed the bare boards of his room towards the door and the staircase beyond.

**The eve of Trinity Sunday, June 1694**

The week had been a transforming one. De La Salle sat again at his desk. The twelve Brothers he had invited to the retreat had been pushing to advance the development of their Society of the Christian Schools. The atmosphere had been prayerful, the discussions honest and open, and De La Salle's draft of their Rules had been well-received. In one area the Brothers had done much of the leading. They were eager to commit their lives to God and had said that now the time was right for them to take perpetual vows. For De La Salle personally it was a conviction he had held for some years concerning his own life. But for the Brothers this was a bold step. The Community had only been formed some 15 years previously, and none of the present members had been there at that time. Now, they were looking to commit themselves for 10, 20, 40 years — whatever life held in store for them. What did their attitude reveal? Enthusiasm, courage, faith, inspiration — perhaps all of these. They were good men, but still with human frailties. Could they maintain their commitment through the many difficulties which De La Salle foresaw still lay ahead? On the other hand, giving one's life to God in such a considered yet generous fashion was to move into the future in a spirit of faith, prepared to see and accept the closeness of God in the life of the Brother.

Well, it was decided. Trinity Sunday 1694 would be the occasion for the group to vow their lives to God to procure his glory in so far as they were able. De La Salle looked at the copy of the vows in his own handwriting which lay before him.

*"I, John Baptist de La Salle, priest, promise and vow to unite myself and remain in society with (these) Brothers ... and to keep together gratuitous schools wherever they may be, even if I were obliged to live on bread alone ..."*

It would be a frightening statement for anyone who did not really believe that God's guiding hand was with the Society. To go 'wherever' one might be sent; to live 'on bread alone': De La Salle knew from his own experience that these things could happen; he had had to leave Rheims, he had often enough been weak with hunger.



But he had also learnt that these were not things to run away from. God would build their Society and guide their work in his own supreme way if they would cooperate. He rejoiced at the thought that these lives

would be offered the next day to the Holy Trinity in trust and praise and that the work of the Christian Schools would continue to spread amongst young people who were in need.

Tres Sainte Trinite' Pere, fils, et saint Esprit Prudence  
Dans un tres profond respect deuant vostre infinie et  
adorable Maieste' de me consacrer et auoir pour  
preuoir vostre gloire aucc . qu'il me sera possible et que  
vous le demanderez de moy et pour et effect de Jean  
Baptiste De la Salle Prestre promets et fais vœu de  
m'uniir et demeurer en societe avec les freres Nicolas  
Guyart, Gabriel Drolin, Jean Partois, Gabriel Charles  
Resiquies, Jean Henry, Jacques Compain, Jean Jaquet  
Jean Louis de Marcheville, Michel Barthelemy Jaquin  
Edme Leguillon, Gilles Pierre, et Claude Rouffel pour  
tenir ensemble et par association les écoles gratuites  
en quelque lieu que ce soit quand mesme de seroit obligé  
pour le faire de demander l'aumone et de vivre de  
pain seulement ou pour faire. Dans laditte societe  
ce a quoy les freres employez soit par le corps de la  
societe soit par les superieurs qui en auront la conduite  
est pour quoy de promets et fais vœu d'obéissance tant  
au corps de cette societe qu'aux superieurs lesquels  
vœux tant d'association que de stabilité dans laditte  
societe et d'obéissance de promets de garder inviolable  
ment pendant toute ma vie en foy de quoy J'ay signé  
fait a vrayment ce sixieme jour de Mars l'année de la feste  
de la Trinite de l'année mil six cent quatre  
quatorze / De la Salle

The first perpetual vows made in the Institute. The text is written in its entirety by the Founder.

nyone who has made vows to last all their lifetime, whether for marriage or religious life, knows the breathtaking risk which facing such a commitment requires. One makes a promise before seeing fully the circumstances in which one will be living it; for richer or poorer, in sickness or health, in this place or that. Will one's spouse suffer serious illness? Will relationships impose unimagined stresses? Will community life become insipid? Will the work be too hard? And so on; there are any number of possibilities. And the question needs to be asked, 'Why does God invite us to make this kind of leap-in-the-dark commitment?'

Many people today would argue that times have changed and that permanent commitment has lost its meaning in a world that offers so many choices and which changes so rapidly. Serious promises which are taken in ignorance or without sufficient thought can certainly be constraining or destructive. But if we are serious about living our life usefully, we have to look ahead to consider the purposes to which we wish to put our relatively brief existence. Everyone ought to be attempting to establish some kind of aim in life even if the goals set are 'simple' ones, such as being a loving spouse and parent, an honest worker, a helpful neighbour. For a person able to live their life in a religious culture the aims might be much more specific. In the case of religious vows they would be a framework along which the pattern of one's life would develop. This

framework is not something resembling railway lines which runs us along a set track. It is more like a garden trellis which offers support and paths for growth and fulfilment. But the growth is always in the context of the questions 'What am I doing with my life?' and 'How am I living my life?' And those challenges are contained in the greater and intensely personal question of 'What is God calling me to do and to be?'

The strength which runs through the whole sense of commitment to God, has to be an experience of intimacy with God through the person of Jesus. There should not be anything inhuman, impersonal or depressing about dedicating one's life to God. On the contrary, there should be a joy and a warmth and a love which overflow into whatever work one is called to do. When we look at De La Salle's life we can find evidence of this. His relationship with Jesus became ever more profound and sustaining and his life followed a fruitful path of development which he could never have foreseen. His example inspired others to follow him with confidence. To his followers he had this insight to pass on, derived from his own experience:

*'You may, in fact, rest assured that God will not allow you to be tried beyond your strength. It is when met? are powerless that He does all, and thereby manifests His power and goodness in a striking manner.'*

Hôtel La Salle:  
the Founder's  
birth-place  
in Rheims





## For prayer and reflection: 5

- We are all faced with the challenge of living our lives with purpose, of choosing aims as a motivation for our everyday work. These aims may sometimes be short-term but should also include some general orientations for our life.

Reflect on what aims you have selected so far regarding the course of your life. Have you considered these in the light of a call by God to shape your life in any particular way?

In prayer you can ask for enlightenment about decisions which affect your life - but try and make this a constant theme of your prayer when you are aware that you are at a time when you have to make choices.

- St. Peter wrote: 'You have been called and chosen: work all the harder to justify it. If you do all these things there is no danger that you will ever fall away. In this way you will be granted admittance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ.' (2 Pet 1 10)

Reflect on what things you need to do today in order to remain faithful to God's call to you.

- You should learn to recognise Jesus beneath the rags of the poor children whom you have to teach. Adore him in their person. ... Faith should lead you to acquit yourself of this task with zeal and affection, since the poor are the members of Christ. ...He always loved poverty and the poor.' (Med 96)

The Institute was built of people who joined together to incarnate in their own age Jesus' particular mission to the poor. In our own time we have enough poverty close at hand, but we also have a global view of the situation

which was impossible in the past. We need to investigate what we can do, even on a small scale, to relieve the situation or to influence the attitude of governments or those around us.

- Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

(Eph 3 20 - 21)

- One spiritual writer said that if a man was aware of how closely God held him, then he might walk on the seabed and no harm would come to him in soul or body. She wrote to shock us into realising how totally we are in the hand of God. Try and recall this closeness at times during the day. If we do this, says De La Salle:

*'He will pour out His spirit upon us ... This same Holy Spirit will enliven our actions and will become a life-giving spirit in them.'*

(Method of Mental Prayer)

- *'Do not be concerned so much about knowing how to do a thing perfectly, as about doing, it as perfectly as you can, for by doing it as well as you know how, you deserve to learn to understand what you would not otherwise know.'*

(De La Salle Collection)

- Lord,  
Teach me to seek you,  
for I cannot seek you unless you teach me.  
I cannot find you unless you show yourself to me.  
Amen.

(St Anselm)

The rue Princesse runs towards the Seine not far from the Ile de la Cite. De La Salle turned into the narrow, cobbled street where the houses rose five stories high, trapping shadows, sounds and smells. He was known here now and passers-by and people in doorways greeted him as he passed. Towards the lower end of the street he halted under a hanging sign where a weather-worn painting depicting St. Anne with the infant Virgin Mary was suspended over a doorway. He pushed open the heavy door and entered the gloom of the archway. He mounted the curving staircase and paused on the landing outside the door.

When he entered the classroom the relative quiet was broken by the scraping of feet and benches as the 60 or so children present rose to their feet. Brother Denis, the teacher, standing by his desk at the front of the ranks of pupils, signalled to the class to sit and the normal activities resumed. One pupil remained standing and continued his recitation of his lesson. He stumbled over a phrase and without using his voice the Brother tapped to signal to him to repeat the section. De La Salle nodded in approval both to the teacher and to the pupil as he completed his section. The next to be tested was a diminutive boy with an unruly mop of chestnut curls and a mischievous expression. His bright eyes made him look alert, and, in fact, he recited his lesson fluently, allowing himself a little smile as he finished. He too received silent praise. Further back in the class a more advanced row of mostly older pupils was poring over a page of their text for that day.

*Qu: 'Why did the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit to our world?'*

*Ans: 'The Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit into our world to fill the apostles with his Holy Spirit and his graces and to form the Church'*

The noise from the street outside drifted into the room, but the atmosphere within the class was orderly and it was evident that the pupils knew what they were expected to do and were, for the most part, applying themselves to it. There were faces wrinkled with concentration, pinched hungry faces, dirty faces surmounting ragged jackets worn shiny with age, tired faces blinking to stay awake, eager faces intent on learning. De La Salle moved around the class quietly, observing the work, encouraging industry with a smile, frowning to cut short one lad's thoughtless yawn.

He was pleased. The school was functioning well; the system was proving its efficacy. The reading charts and classroom instructions were neatly presented on the wall and there were crucifix and statue in place. Many of these pupils would eventually transfer to the

writing class and would leave the environment of the school well on their way to becoming useful citizens and Christians in behaviour and conviction as well as in name. A church-bell sounded from over the rooftops: a pupil stood, removed his hat and announced 'Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God.' The class fell into a motionless and refreshing silence.

As he reached the street De La Salle had to pause to avoid a commotion. Two police officers were dragging along a ragged, struggling child followed by a neighbourhood crowd. Some of the shouting was foul and aggressive.

"Its for theft." One of the officers was shouting in reply. "He's a thief. He was caught and he'll get what he deserves."

"His father will see about that," yelled a woman.

'He'll have to,' was the officer's parting shot as they dragged their victim around the corner still trailed by a part of the crowd.

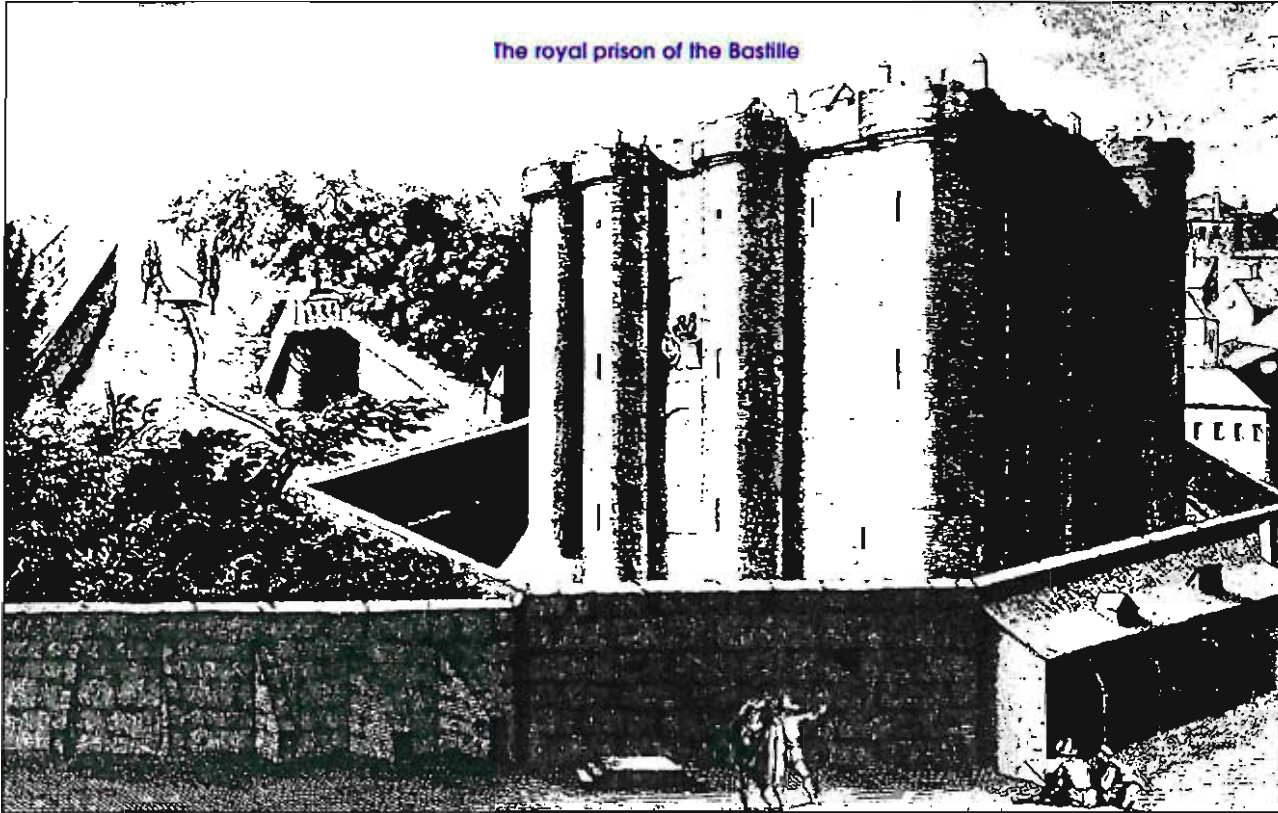
De La Salle turned sadly in the other direction. There went someone he hadn't reached. There was still so much need for schools that could cater for such people. As he arrived at the community house in the rue Charonne, a person unknown to him asked if he were Monsieur de La Salle and, when he confirmed his identity, he was handed a sealed letter addressed in his name.

The Bastille lay on the other bank of the river to the rue Princesse but was known by reputation across the whole of Paris. De La Salle had faced more than once in his disputes with the Writing Masters the prospect of being imprisoned in some such fortress. On this occasion the circumstances were quite different. The discreet letter from the Governor himself requesting that De La Salle would be so kind as to act as confessor to a sick priest was unusual and unexpected. The thought of refusal did not cross his mind but his mood was oppressed as he approached the great square fortress with its rearing walls and fortified gateway.

From the inside, the prison exuded more gloom than horror. Soldiers and gaolers eyed him suspiciously but, because of his poor dress, considered him as an unlikely source of bribes. Gates clanged, doors slammed and locks and bolts snapped home. The passageways were dark and damp. As he penetrated farther into the depths, shouts echoed vaguely and the air was fetid with the smell of sewage and decay. His last guide was pale and fat and wheezed as he walked: he provided a laconic commentary as they passed cells; 'Debt', 'Forgery', 'Defamation', 'Embezzlement.' At one cell he



The royal prison of the Bastille



just shrugged before stopping at the next one along. 'He's lucky to be alive. You're welcome to him. I'll be down the passageway. Just shout when you're finished,' and he locked the door behind him.

The smell was appalling. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness De La Salle saw that he was standing in a small cell containing a stool and a plank-like table. The diffuse light from a high grating revealed a dark form lying on a spread of straw in a corner. De La Salle moved carefully across the black, oozy debris on the floor and brought the stool to where he could bend towards the man as he struggled to raise himself. Even in that poor light it was obvious that he was weak and ill; his face showed also the torment of his mind and tears trickled down his cheeks as he whispered "Monsieur de La Salle, I heard about you. I am so glad you have come.

De La Salle heard the poor priest's story, gave him absolution and spoke from his heart of the burning love of God for each human being and the mystery of our sufferings united to those of Jesus, while his penitent listened eagerly. His heart felt swollen with sorrow at the plight of this forgotten man. When his spiritual words and human sympathy had done all the good he could hope, there was just one action he could undertake to relieve the physical poverty. He helped the reluctant man remove his decrepit soutane and grime-encrusted shirt and passed him his own modest enough garments to put on. They ought to be adequate for his needs. It seemed at least as if the prisoner's years behind bars were drawing to an end. His frailty made it

hard to think that he would last too much longer.

He had to shout several times for the gaoler. The latter checked the prisoner by the light of his lantern and then looked fixedly at De La Salle for a moment.

"Looks better," he pronounced in his economical style. "You coming again?" he asked once they were outside the cell.

"That may be," replied De La Salle. Wrapped in his cloak so that his rags were hidden he made his way out of the Bastille and into the light of the streets, bright in comparison even though a light drizzle was falling. He was already aware that the filthy garments he had on were crawling with vermin. The sensation was not a pleasant one. He felt at peace, though, as he walked and close to Jesus. The wretched prisoner had found what he most needed, a release greater even than that of freedom, brought by God's forgiveness and love. And for himself, he felt privileged to have been able to minister God's gifts to someone in real need. Even the discomfort of the clothing seemed a precious moment of sharing in the shame which his Lord had undergone for his sake. And the exhausting work in the crowded classrooms with poor children was really the same thing. 'We are poor Brothers, forgotten by the world and esteemed of no consequence,' he thought to himself as he walked.

A few days later, another sealed letter was delivered to De La Salle at the community house in the rue de Charonne. The note thanked him for his visit. The prisoner had died. De La Salle promised himself to dedicate some masses for the repose of his soul, though he did not doubt that he had gone to God.

## For prayer and reflection: 6

- De La Salle included in his writings a profound vision of the educator as the chosen minister of God's word.

*'God is so good  
that He not only brings us into existence by His  
act of creation  
but also desires that all of us come to the  
knowledge of truth ...  
God diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge  
throughout the world by human ministers.  
Just as he commanded a light to shine out of  
darkness,  
so He also kindles a light  
in the hearts of those whom He has called  
to announce his word to children ...'* (Med 193)

We all have a witness to give to young people. We can ask ourselves in what way we are the voice of Jesus, the hands of Jesus, the forgiveness, the kindness of Jesus for those whom we encounter.

- For the Brothers. De La Salle emphasised the need for prayer in order to convert the hearts of the young to Jesus:

*'You must, then devote yourself very thoroughly to prayer in order to succeed in your ministry. You must constantly represent the needs of your*

*disciples to Jesus Christ, explaining to him the difficulties you experience in guiding them.'*

The formula was obviously a powerful one because people soon noticed a great change in the behaviour of the young people in their care. Prayer, in other words, is not just a private quiet time with God, it should permeate all our work and relationships. Do we often bring our own problems to God in this fashion? Do we ask God to act in the heart of someone whom we find impervious to our own efforts to help them?

- 'I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.'  
(Matt 25:40)

You could find an occasion from your day when you acted generously towards another person and thank God for the opportunity that was given you.

- *We can justly say  
that the future of humanity  
lies in the hands  
of those who are strong enough  
to provide coming generations  
with reasons for living and hoping.*  
(Gaudium et Spes)



An Englishman commenting on his visit to Paris in 1698 wrote: "The multitude of the poor and wretched is so great in all areas, that whether in a coach, on foot, or in a shop, you can make no progress because of the importunity of the beggars. It is truly lamentable to listen to their tales of misery."

In Rheims, during the famine time of 1683–85, De La Salle had distributed his wealth to those in need and, along with his Brothers, had joined the ranks of the poor. This did not place them amongst the indigent since they had their slender income from whatever parish employed them, although some of this was used for school supplies and to support Brothers who were not teaching. But it often left them short of money for daily necessities and, above all, it left them vulnerable in times of shortage. The Brothers lived alongside the poor and shared their difficulties of daily living. Inspired by De La Salle, they understood that they had a special mission to the poor who were so often left in deep ignorance of the uplifting Christian message as well as lacking the knowledge and motivation to improve their situation.

For the Brothers and De La Salle, poverty was also a gesture of trust in God. When De La Salle had thought of using his money to establish his schools on a sound basis, Father Barré had told him: "If you use your money to found these schools, they will founder." Hence his decision to follow the path of Divine Providence in the development of the Brothers' work. During the famine of the years 1693–94, the precariousness of their financial situation was clearly exposed and the Brothers had to live through periods of genuine suffering. For some, the difficulties of the life became too much and they left; for others the experiences went to building up their trust in God's care for them no matter what might occur.

On 5 January 1709, the temperature at Paris was 10.7°. The following morning it had fallen to -3.1°. It was the start of what folk-memory called 'The Great Winter'. Such was the ensuing cold that within a few days most of the rivers of France were frozen over. By 10 January, loaded carts were crossing the Seine. For two-and-a-half months the country endured a winter of snow and ice and fierce cold. Numerous details recorded give us some impression of what that time was like. Trees split in the frost with a sound like musket-fire. Animals died in the fields and in stables. Travellers were discovered frozen to death. Fruit trees and the grain in the fields were destroyed. Church and town clocks seized up. Wine froze in the chalices at Mass. People used axes to cut what bread was available. Fingers would freeze to wet dishes; a cat's tongue froze into the dish of milk it was feeding from. Wine-barrels

burst and great icicles protruded from the split staves. The interior of houses reached temperatures of -10° or less. Even in more affluent households there were comparatively few fireplaces and it was impossible to keep rooms warm. In bed, surrounded by down-filled blankets, seems to have been one of the few safe places, though lips and pillows were rimed with frost and icicles in the mornings and infants were found frozen to death in their cots.

Enduring the cold was only part of the problem. Supplies of food became harder to procure and prices began to rise. The rich were hard enough pressed to look after themselves: for those who lived all the time on the borders of destitution the situation rapidly became desperate.

In 1709, the novitiate community was established in the property of St Yon in Rouen alongside the Brothers who taught (for inadequate stipends) in the town's schools. Most of the house there would have been unheated and the clothing and bedding and food inadequate for such severe weather. The frozen rivers prevented the usual commerce of the city and the manufacturing activity of the area came to a halt. There were an estimated 25,000 poor and unemployed labourers around the town in the early spring of that year. Once income ceased, most labourers were reduced to the ranks of the destitute and depended on charity in order to survive. The pressure on supplies was so great that De La Salle decided to move the novices back to Paris despite the difficulties that would be caused there through lack of space and the demands on the Paris communities.

A priest who knew the Brothers well remarked at this time that there was no community poorer than theirs, and that, although they had suffered from the famine, no one had died and their numbers had even increased, while other better off religious communities had fallen deeply into debt or been ruined financially. In a previous time of shortage, certain religious communities had been publicly criticised for buying excessively and forcing up the price of grain.

*He protects the lives of the upright ...  
in time of famine their food shall not fail. (Ps. 36)*

France suffered deeply from the famine and the ensuing disruption and disease. The king gave little lead in relieving the distress, and towns and administrators struggled to control the situations that faced them as best they could. At an administrative level there was often little understanding or ability to cope with the increased numbers of poor. In theory, the indigent should have been shut up in the 'General Hospitals', set

to work and not released unless someone could guarantee their financial security. Such a system took away people's freedom and cut them off from a return to work and solvency when times improved. But it was incapable of coping with the numbers involved even had people been willing to cooperate with such methods. Paris and other towns issued numerous decrees banning the indigent from their environs and backing them up with fierce penalties; imprisonment and whipping for a first offence, five years in the galleys for a second offence. Even these measures were incapable of stemming the tide of desperate people.

De La Salle was not the only devoted character who impoverished himself to assist others. The times of famine brought forth heroes in different places and walks of life and some towns showed genuine concern and good organisation in helping the poor. But over and above his generosity, De La Salle had a vision of justice and liberation for the poor which went beyond the relief

of extreme want. He aimed to give them education, skills and independence which would enable them to play a useful role in social and economic life. He wanted this power to be enlightened by deeply-held Christian principles so that a caring and just society could develop which would respect the dignity of each person. He and the Brothers worked alongside the poor and the deprived in order to help them rise from their state of fragile survival to a more fully human level. We can contrast this with the official attempts to cope with the burden of the poor and see that De La Salle's vision aimed at the roots of the problem and would, over time, have a significant effect on society.

In the gospel Jesus invites those who would be perfect to sell what they own and give the money to the poor and then to follow him. De La Salle accepted this invitation as addressed to himself. And, following the example of Jesus, it was not just his wealth but his life which he shared with those who were in need.



Gagliardi's depiction of De La Salle distributing bread to the poor during the terrible winter of 1684-85



## For prayer and reflection: 7

- When he spoke to the Brothers after the famine of 1694, De La Salle pointed out the care which God had taken of them:

*'During all this time, when the wealthiest were not always sure of finding, at whatever price, bread which had become as rare as it was expensive, what did you lack? Thanks be to God, although we have had neither money nor income, during these two terrible years, we have lacked nothing. We owe no one anything in any of our houses.'*

We are dependent on God for everything, of course, but usually we like to take our own precautions just in case he forgets us at a crucial time. De La Salle's total trust in Divine Providence was not a passive attitude, he went out and begged for food for the community when necessary. But when he had done as well as he could what he felt God was asking him to do, he left the consequences in God's hands and awaited the results with a peace of mind which often challenged his companions.

We can start developing our trust in God in small ways; by putting the outcome of our efforts into his hands, not worrying too much about success or failure once we have done our best. This assumes a prayerful approach to carrying out our duties so that we entrust the whole process to God's care.

- De La Salle provided a leadership which inspired others. We might consider who are the leaders today whom we admire. What is it that they do which marks them out? Can we put something of their example into practice in our own life?
- *'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'* (John 10) Jesus' example inspired De La Salle to work to give life, human and spiritual, to those who were most deprived. There are many social

injustices today that we should be aware of and do something to remedy. Developing feelings of sympathy and bringing people and events to God in prayer is an excellent way of opening one's heart to the needs of the deprived.

- For those involved in work with young people, De La Salle saw that the young were more influenced by what they did than what they said. He wanted school to be a place where students were attracted towards good rather than hectored or dragged. He also wanted young people to have the opportunity to practice charity, first of all amongst themselves so that they learnt by being involved in action.

Modern youth are often described as 'spoiled'. Adults here have to ask themselves whether they have given young people the opportunity and encouragement to become involved in helping others. Even doing good ourselves is not outgoing enough; we should be trying to attract others to become involved in an essential process of human solidarity.

- *I was thirsty for life and vitality  
and you helped me to grow.  
I was thirsty for encouragement  
and you affirmed and built me up.  
I was thirsty for moral support  
and, willingly, you shared my cup of suffering.*  
(Based on Mt 25)
- *'Do not worry; do not say, "What are we to eat?  
What are we to drink? How are we to be clothed?  
... Your heavenly Father knows that you need  
these things. Set your hearts on his kingdom first,  
and on his righteousness, and all these other  
things will be given you as well. So do not worry  
about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself  
Each day has enough trouble of its own.'*  
(Matt 6:31-34)

From a distance it could have been anyone making their way up to the top of the rise. A man, certainly, but beyond that it was difficult to tell much. He was wearing a black hat with a wide brim and was swathed in a large cloak which concealed the remainder of his attire. He walked slowly but steadily, as if he had come a long distance and was concentrating his remaining energies on attaining his goal. De La Salle paused at the top of the rise; ahead and below he could see the town, house roofs and church towers rising behind the walls. He surveyed the route he had come, a rocky landscape, sharp cliffs cut by narrow gorges, patches of dense woodland, bare, rugged heights, the occasional abandoned village or farmhouse.

A difficult country to live in; difficult for walking, ideal for thieves or armed bands. He knew of its recent ferocious history. The Protestant *Camisards* had fought against the oppressive measures that followed the revocation of the Edict of Nantes<sup>1</sup> and the region had known battles and skirmishes and murders in the name of religion before an uneasy peace had been established. The legacy of decades of tension and struggle was still a living force in the whole area, and the towns where the Brothers ran schools were in the heart of this. De La Salle pressed on towards the town; it was getting late in the day and he needed to arrive before the gates were closed.

The Brothers' surprise at seeing him was rapidly replaced by a joyous welcome that made De La Salle feel less tired. After he had washed and they had prayed together, they lingered around the table after the food was finished and talked. For the Brothers, René and Maxime, this appearance of their Superior was a heaven-sent chance for them to relieve their feelings and share the burdens which they had borne since their arrival the previous year. Their first reaction, though, was one of thanks that De La Salle, travelling alone, had come safely through the surrounding country.

"There are some who would certainly try to kill you," René told him. "After what we have seen here, we know they would stop at nothing to destroy our work."

"At first we thought that they would just do things to upset us and show us that they didn't want a Catholic school," added Maxime. "They would leave rubbish on the doorstep, or a cart across the door to prevent us leaving. But soon we had to be careful if we left the house when it was dark. They threw stones at us and we were followed by men with sticks ready to attack us."

"You have been severely tried indeed," said De La Salle looking searchingly at their faces as if checking their level of stress or the strength of their faith. René was a short, cheerful man with a dark complexion and roundish face. Maxime was tall with thin features, a

long hooked nose and sunken eyes. They were excited but neither seemed at all crushed by the persecution they had suffered.

"The night they came to the house was the worst of all, though. We expected to die."

"Yes, you nearly had two martyrs," smiled René. "If you look at the shutters and the door tomorrow you will see the marks of the rocks and their tools. The din was terrifying. As I told you in my letter, we just retired to the chapel and offered our lives as a sacrifice to God."

"I did that," agreed Maxime wryly, "but I also prayed and prayed that the Lord would deliver us. And then the magistrate arrived with a troop of men. It felt like a miracle, like Moses escaping from the Egyptian army."

"I was very proud of both of you," said De La Salle quietly. "You took the best possible course of action. All the time our real reliance must be totally on God. I was most thankful that you offered no violence against those who intended to harm you. That would have made your task in school even more difficult."

"You are quite right there. It is difficult enough to win the confidence of these children even without giving them good reason to hate us. Many of them have parents who try each day to undo anything we have taught them during the religion lesson. I am sure that some of them think we are spies as well."

"I sometimes wonder whether we can do much good here," said Maxime, looking at De La Salle, "They are so resistant."

"I understand your feelings and your difficulties," responded De La Salle. "But God wants everybody to be saved and these children too deserve to have the Good News announced to them. If all that they know of the Catholic Church is the soldiers who tramp through their streets and the laws which they consider unjust, they will never accept the good that our faith can offer them. You must be the face of this goodness for them. Act towards them with love and a sincere zeal, accepting with much patience the difficulties you have to suffer. God has chosen you for this work and you must be willing to be dishonoured by men and mistreated, even to give your life for Jesus in fulfilment of your ministry. You have come through much already and we shall all pray that you may continue with such a spirit of faith."

"We shall do our best for them," promised René.

"And always remember in school to appear welcoming and to treat them with respect. In order to give them a liking for school, try not to punish them too much as that is one of the quickest ways of driving them away. If you follow the guidance of our Conduct of Schools<sup>2</sup> you will be effective."

There was a pause in the talk. Words are soon



spoken, more slowly taken to heart. It was René who broke the silence.

"It is true that the people have suffered much. Many have lost relatives in the fighting. There are penalties and pressures which take away their money and make their lives miserable and they have little protection against the bullying of the soldiers. I can see why they would want to keep their children out of the clutches of such government. The authorities have even suggested that they oblige all parents to send their children to school under pain of fines. They would resent that."

"It is not by force that we will lead them to God," responded De La Salle with more vigour than usual. "We must touch their hearts so that they come willingly

to God. I will broach the matter with the Bishop to try and prevent this from happening. It is not what I wish to see. We must accept that our work in this town may proceed slowly, though since it is really the Lord's work it will bear fruit in his own good time."

René, aware of De La Salle's tired state, saw an opening for his final initiative of the day: "I'm sure that now it is time for us to retire and give thanks to God for our day. Tomorrow we would be pleased to hear news of the communities." The suggestion was accepted as instruction and after a short prayer the community moved off to their beds by candlelight leaving the downstairs to darkness and the faint rattle of bolted doors and shutters under the pressure of the wind.

## For prayer and reflection: 8

- A constant theme of De La Salle is that of 'touching hearts'. Evangelisation was, for him, the bringing of 'good news' in one's own person as well as in one's words. He wanted the Brothers to respond with politeness and patience when they were under stress, and he knew all the typical incidents with pupils or with parents which could tax the most equable of temperaments.

We could ask ourselves how often we try to put into practice Jesus' instruction to 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. How did we react last time we were unfairly treated by someone?

- Praying for our enemies doesn't necessarily take away the feelings of anger that we can harbour towards a person, but it does start to work at the root of the problem. It is a good idea from time to time to examine how we feel about people we don't get on too well with. Sometimes we cover up feelings of inferiority or jealousy and until these are uncovered it is difficult to see how we can remedy the situation.
- Christian educators, according to De La Salle, are direct representatives of Christ:

*'Since you are ambassadors and ministers of Jesus Christ in the work that you do, you must*

*act as representing Jesus Christ himself. He wants your disciples to see him in you and receive your teaching as if he were teaching them ... They are a letter which Christ dictates to you, which you write each day in their hearts, not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God. For the Spirit acts in you and by you through the power of Jesus Christ.'* (Med 195)

Parents, teachers, catechists all share in that task of education. If we are really to produce the desired fruit, we ourselves have to meditate on the word of God in scripture and invoke the aid of the Holy Spirit. There is scope for prayerful reading of scripture and also for deeper meditation on one of Jesus' sayings, for example. We should make sure that we have a regular time for prayer each day, quality time, so that it doesn't just get squeezed out by all the other crowd of activities.

- *Lord Jesus,  
I give you my hands — to do your work.  
I give you my feet — to go your way.  
I give you my eyes — to see as you do.  
I give you my tongue — to speak your words.  
I give you my mind — that you may think in me.  
I give you my spirit — that you may re-ray in me.  
Above all, I give you my heart —  
that you may love in me  
your Father and all mankind Amen.*

(The Grail Prayer)

Brother Ponce, the Visitor, had also abandoned the Brothers after selling off from the house everything he could and taking all the available money. Timothy finished by asking the Founder of the Brothers to tell him what he should do now.

“Why have you come to trouble my peace? I can’t believe that people are still looking to me after all this time and I have no desire to be disturbed in this place of retreat where I am now so settled.” Timothy was startled by the response. The words tumbled out of him reminding De La Salle that he was their Father; that he was the one who had led the Brothers through so many difficulties, who God had inspired to organise and instruct the communities. And that now, as much as ever, they were in need of his support and enlightenment.

“My dear Brother,” began De La Salle with all the

calm he could muster, “now why are you telling me all this? Are you not aware of my inability to command others? Do you not know that several among you no longer want me as their superior? And they are quite right, I am incapable of it.”

Timothy’s tears were the most effective part of his answer; that and his refusal to depart until he had been told what task it was that De La Salle wanted him to carry out in the Institute.

The spell of solitude had been broken. However difficult it was to tear himself away, De La Salle could see that there was a reconciliation to attempt at Mende and that rumours of his abandonment of his Institute were causing further problems. And Timothy and Brothers like him could perhaps still derive some benefit from his presence, for a while at least — his long-term future still seemed no clearer.

## For prayer and reflection: 9

- We have a record of some of the words that De La Salle spoke to two friends towards the end of his life when he was describing the difficulties which he had had to face:

*“I tell you, gentlemen, that if God, in showing me the good that would be done by this Society had also discovered to me the trials and crosses which were to accompany it, I would have lacked courage, and far from assuming charge of it, I would not have dared to touch it with the tips of my fingers.”*

There will be times in most of our lives when we feel tired and frustrated with the way things are going. That seems to be part of the lot of those who work for God. Such feelings should lead us to put our faith in the God who sustains all things: sometimes that is the only consolation available in a given situation. Things will turn out the way God wants if we work with him. The final part of De La Salle’s words to his friends is as follows:

*“In a word, if God had not stretched out His hand to sustain this edifice in a visible manner, it would long since have been buried in ruins.”*

- Silence and peaceful atmosphere are great helps in the practice of prayer. A part of our prayer should be to occupy our mind with the thought of the presence of God. We can consider God present in the depth of our own person; St. Paul writes:

*‘Surely you know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you.’ (1 Cor.3 16)*

We should then be able to carry this awareness of God’s presence into our daily life.

*‘All that I do should be so many inspirations which invite me to raise my mind to you; all of the inspirations of my heart are so many touches that you give to it to remind it to belong entirely to you.’*

*(EMMP 50 D)*

- Prayer does not need to consist of lots of word. We need times of silence in order to listen to what the Lord is telling us.

A way of praying that allows us to rest in God and open our mind to him is to use a short phrase repeated frequently; such as ‘Jesus, my redeemer’, ‘God of love’, or ‘Jesus, Son of God’.

- *In you we live and move;  
in you we have our being.  
We are in your love,  
enfolded in your peace,  
surrounded by your might.  
Open our eyes, Lord; enlarge our vision.  
Open our hearts, Lord; increase our faith.*

*(David Adam)*



The horse was moving more slowly now and slipping on some of the steeper sections of the path. Probably it too was beginning to feel some weariness towards the end of the journey. De La Salle had ridden out of Grenoble that morning. He had kept his destination secret, merely telling the Brother Director that he would be absent on business for some while and out of touch. In an emergency the Brothers could address themselves to the parish priest of St. Laurent. He had left behind his small turret room in the Brother's lodgings above the classrooms, the spiral staircase, the damp flagstones of the passageways, the noise that drifted up from the street and the occasional roar of the nearby river in spate.

He was now well away from the city, climbing towards the jutting summit of the hill of Parmenie. The path led through dense forest where the mossy trunks grew tall in their search for light. Springs broke out of the hillside and trickled down through the debris of rocks and dead leaves, nourishing ferns and spring flowers as they flowed. He had met only one person on his way up the hill; an old peasant woman with an extraordinarily wrinkled face, guarding sheep in a grassy clearing. Her dark eyes had gleamed at the mention of his destination. "She's a good woman up there," she had said with quiet conviction, "May God bless you, sir." The simple blessing was welcome to De La Salle. That Sister Louise was a good person he knew from experience and he was aware of how glad he was at that moment to be returning, this time for a spell as Director of the retreat centre.

They sat side by side on a large, white boulder near the summit of the hill. The view extended over a vast territory; east towards Grenoble and the high snow-capped mountains beyond the town, south along the valley of the Isère and west where the land dropped away into rolling hills. The few weeks since their last talks had not affected the depth of their rapport. De La Salle was speaking;

"So, you see, when Monsieur de Saléon invited me to replace him for the time of his absence, it seemed as if it were the Lord's providence leading me here a second time."

"I am sure it was," answered Sister Louise. "I think you still have a great need of a time of peace to strengthen you, and the Lord, in his goodness, is going to give you all that you need. I know, as well, that he has sent you here so that I may receive the support which he will give me through you. I still have many things in the scriptures and in my prayer which you can help me to understand. For two years I have acted in darkness, lacking the guidance I required."

"The Lord is close to the broken hearted'," quoted De La Salle, "'Those crushed in spirit he will save'. He does not leave us — ever, even if we have no clear sign of his presence."

Louise turned her face towards him. Despite her greater age her complexion was still fresh and her glance grave but lively. "So how have your affairs gone since we last spoke? You had many things which were distressing you and I have prayed that you might see how God wishes you to act." De La Salle breathed deeply and took a moment before replying.

"There has been no great change. I feel at peace with God, but my own incapacity weighs me down. My health has still not fully returned after my illness and I am unable to do all that I wish. But, more important than that, I still have no indication that those who have opposed me and contested my role with the Institute of the Brothers have changed their opinions. I feel that I cannot return so long as that is the case."

"Is that not always the lot of those who work for the Lord?"

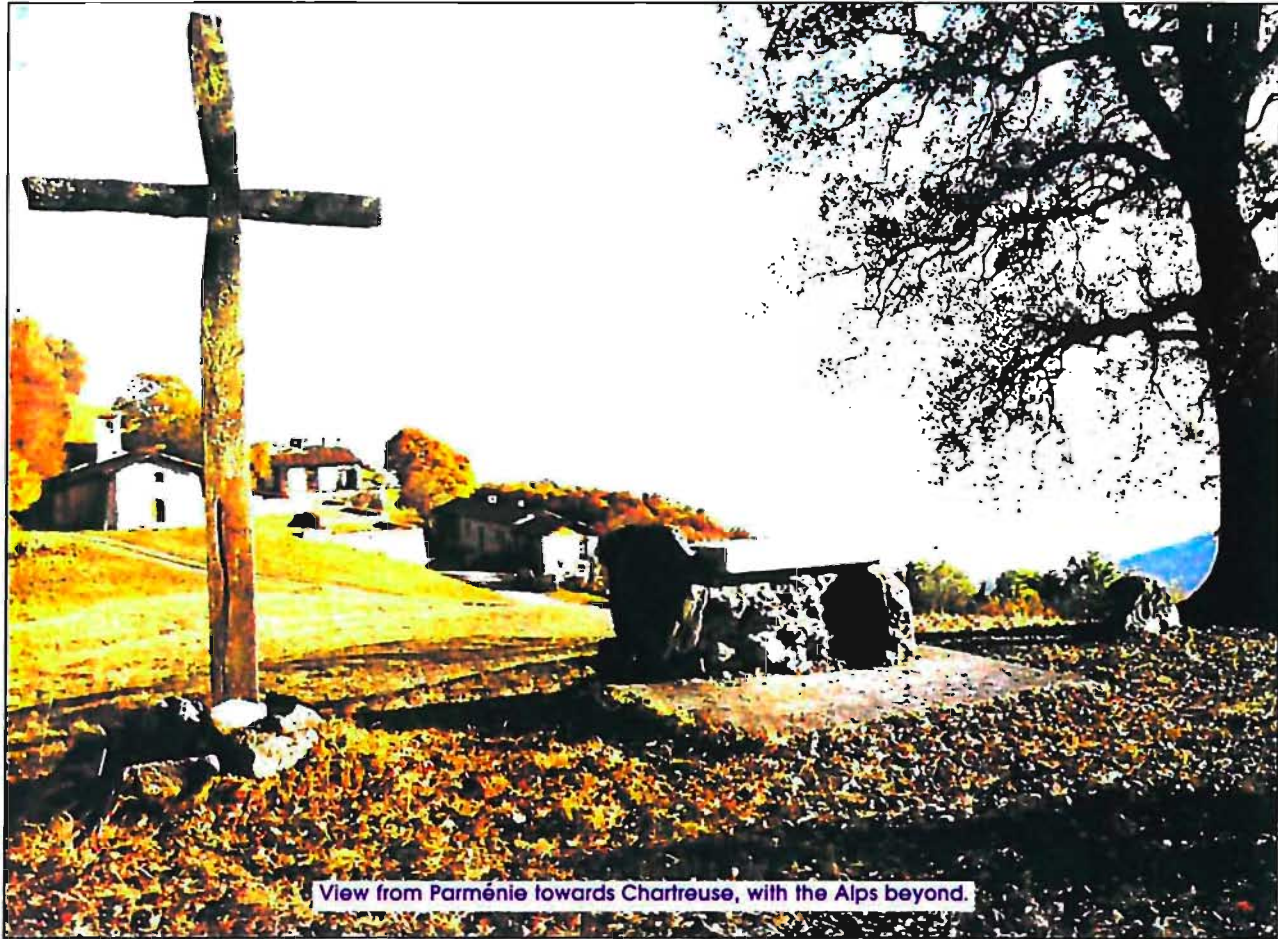
"Perhaps that is so, but in this case it is some of the Brothers themselves who would like to be rid of me and I am no longer sure of the position of Brother Barthélemy, the one who is now in charge. He has had the bishops appoint clergy as directors over each community, a policy that I have fought against for many years."

"But do you do believe he is a good man, dedicated to the work of the Institute?"

"Yes, I do. It is possible that he has been confused over this matter. But there are other more serious examples. I have suffered for years and had our work threatened by good people; that is the most troubling thing. I do not understand how priests such as M. de La Chétardie and M. Baudrand can create such difficulties for the work of saving young people. In Paris and in Marseilles, for example, the work had seemed to start so well and then we became embroiled in disagreements which I was unable to resolve. There were aspects of the Brother's life which I felt God had made clear to me and which I could not compromise on. But the opposition became so personal and damaging to our work that it seemed better that I should withdraw from the scene so that the harassment would die down. That is what I have done."

Louise smiled slightly. "I understand," she said. "I have told you of the opposition which I had to face when I began my work here those many years ago. And many of those were good people too. Sometimes I think that such difficulties will only cease when we are dead."

The conversation paused. The two people followed their own thoughts for a while. De La Salle looked out



View from Parménie towards Chartrreuse, with the Alps beyond.

over the forests and into the valley, seeing the tiny fields, the smudges of smoke over the villages, the distant trail of the road following the course of the river.

“I have long wanted to live in greater solitude,” he said finally, “and to devote more time to prayer and work for the conversion of hardened sinners. It seems to me that here is a place where I would be free to do that.”

“No,” said Louise suddenly, “though it grieves me to say it, I do not think that this is what you are called to. I see clearly that God gave the Institute to you and you to the Institute and that you still have much to do for it. God will show you in what way you must work with the Brothers; I foresee that there will still be times of great suffering for you but that you must work through these with love and for the greater glory of God.”

Louise laid her hand on his arm and despite the unaccustomed nature of the gesture De La Salle did not react. “I see, as well,” she added, “that during your time here you will receive a clear sign from God of the path you are to follow.”

“I shall try to follow, at all, times, the will of God in my regard.”

When she had gone, De La Salle remained on the hillside recalling her words and speaking to God from his heart. The afternoon had been unusually warm and thunderclouds were now rolling down from the massif opposite. As he prayed the dark clouds moved up the

valley accompanied by the echoing rumble of thunder. To the west the sun was vanishing in a purple haze. It was the thin chime of the chapel bell which finally prompted him to leave his place and join the community for evening prayer as the first heavy raindrops splashed on the rocks.

Within a few weeks of his arrival at Parménie, De La Salle received a letter written from Paris by the principal Brothers requesting, in respect of the vow of obedience which he had made, the return of their ‘very dear Father ... to whom God has given the graces and the talents necessary for the good governance of this new company’. When he shared the news with Sister Louise, her response was clear and direct: “You must understand, that it is not enough that you made the virtue of obedience one of the main points in the rules of your Institute; I think that the best rule is that you now put into practice yourself that which you have been teaching others.”

De La Salle and Sister Louise took leave of each other regretfully but full of joy and thanksgiving to God for an encounter which had done so much good to both of them. On his return to Grenoble the Brothers noted a dramatic change: ‘His words were on fire and his soul appeared to be renewed.’ Some while after this he set out on his return journey towards Paris.



## For prayer and reflection: 10

- In one letter to a Sister, De La Salle wrote about the difficulty of feeling separated from God:

*'The profound darkness which you experience is the means that God gives to draw you more surely to himself. You know quite well that the more darkness and doubt you experience in your life, the more you will live by faith ...'*

The very act of praying is going to be difficult for everybody at some stage or other. That is precisely the time to be most attentive to praying regularly. As the letter points out, it is that moment, when we do not see or feel close, when we are called to place more trust in God. Most spiritual writers characterise it as a time of growth in spite of the fact that we do not see it as productive.

- Difficult times in our life can often be made more bearable by sharing them with someone else. Sometimes it is actually advisable to seek guidance from some wise person so that we do not get held down by unnecessary doubts about what course of action to take. Certainly this kind of sharing and mutual help is part of the nature of Christian life. It may well be that in small ways we are invited to help others: in which case our own life of prayer should be our primary resource.

*'Be compassionate as my Father is compassionate.'* (Lk 6:36)

- Keeping a journal is one way in which we may gain insights into what is happening in our prayer and where the Holy Spirit is leading us. Such a journal could be either private or shared. We can record any significant thoughts or words which come to us during prayer as well as whether the prayer has been easy or difficult or full of distractions. We should avoid passing judgement on the quality of our prayer; as the scripture says, 'Judgement belongs to the Lord', and it is much safer for us to offer our prayer to the Lord just as it was, maybe resolving to try and improve on some aspect next time we pray.
- De La Salle saw that God leads us through the events in our lives as well as during times of prayer.

Late on in his life he wrote:

*'God, who guides all things with wisdom and serenity, Whose way it is not to force the inclinations of persons, willed to commit me entirely to the development of the schools. He did this in an imperceptible way and over a long period of time so that one commitment led to another in a way that I did not foresee in the beginning.'*

We can reflect on our own lives in the light of this and see if we can find a pattern in the way that God is leading us.

- The last words of De La Salle were:

*"I adore in all things the will of God in my regard."*

This is not a prayer which we can repeat lightly. We might start by applying it just to a particular event in our lives.

- Christians are an 'Easter people'. We know that God loves us and that Jesus has redeemed us and overcome all evil. Deep down we should experience a sense of peace and joy in the knowledge of this. As feelings, these may disappear when we are under stress but we should not lose the convictions that give rise to them. Jesus' greeting to his disciples was often 'Peace be with you'. Likewise Paul begins his letters with similar greetings: 'Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' We should check from time to time that we are living in this peace — and also showing it in our behaviour.

- *'Work as if everything depended on you, and pray as if everything depended on God.'* (St Augustine)

- *Lord Jesus Christ, make perfect what you have begun, and grant me what you have made me long for, not according to what I deserve, but because your goodness always precedes anything that we do. Amen.*

(St Anselm)

De La Salle emerged from the door of the 'prison' wing of the St. Yon complex, where he had been to visit some of the young men detained under the charge of the Brothers. He walked across the lower end of the recreation field on his way around to his own room. A group of boarding pupils in that section of the field ran across to greet him. He wore a soutane, dark cloak and a black, wide-brimmed hat. It might have seemed to a well-read pupil as if this singular figure had staggered straight out of one of Perrault's folk-tales. There was a somewhat magical aura around him that exerted its own spell and the pupils slowed up before they reached him and greeted him respectfully. Many of them went to him for confession and were used to talking with him. His courteous answers and smiles were always reassuring and there seemed to be a depth of concern in his enquiries about their lives and work which made them ready to trust him with their thoughts and to treasure the words of comfort or advice that he offered. His sharp, blue eyes observed them attentively as they talked; in their turn they noticed his grey hair, his stooped and pared down figure and the peaceful repose of his features. He disengaged himself eventually from the pupils, leaving them to their play, and walked slowly towards the little line of rooms detached from the main buildings. His own room was small and would have seemed very bare if it had not been for the shelves of books. On his table lay writing materials and papers including many completed sheets of his writings explaining the details of interior prayer. He was glad to return to the quiet of this room and resume a closer concentration on the presence of God as well as praying specifically for the problems of the youths he had earlier left in their rooms under lock and key.

As he spent increasing amounts of time in prayer, it seemed to De La Salle that his own life was becoming more insubstantial, that the influence of the Holy Spirit guided more and more his thoughts and his responses to events. To some of the less perspicacious Brothers, especially those who had only known him in the last couple of years, he hardly seemed to be a person of consequence. He gave himself no important airs, accepted no privileges, followed the same regulations as the others and did his best to keep a low profile. He had disinvested himself of the natural authority which the Brothers had seen in him over the decades and he rarely spoke in such tones either to people or about the events that concerned the Brothers. A task to which he did dedicate himself was that of teaching the method of interior prayer to the novices whose progress he followed with the utmost care. Each day before the midday meal he would gather them in the chapel and by

a mixture of explanation and example he would lead them through the stages of awareness of God's presence in their lives and demonstrate ways of speaking and listening to God. His presence seemed like a light which illumined their prayer, an experience which was repeated when he said mass for them, so aware did he seem of the immensity of the occasion.

The evening meal was finished and De La Salle had still not appeared. The Brothers were talking and relaxing after their day's work.

"He should be here," announced Louis, always ready to put order into the lives of others. "He's supposed to be an example to us. Rules are rules, he can't go breaking them just like that. Why didn't someone go and tell him?"

"He's speaking to someone."

"Well it isn't the time for that. And he's not supposed to be meeting outsiders all the time, especially at this hour of the day."

"He's hearing a confession," explained Brother Michael, patiently. "And," he continued quickly before Louis could object to this, "he has been there a couple of hours already."

"Yes, it's that ex-soldier again," added Philip, also anxious to halt Louis' show of offended righteousness. "The first time he came I was quite frightened by him. He seemed such a fierce, violent presence with his scarred face and his dark eyes where you couldn't find a spark of light. I felt as if I was facing an armed criminal some dark alley. But he's changed already. One time he told me something of his, life. Stories of killing and robbery and treachery that made me ill just listening to them. They still haunt me." He grimaced and shivered.

"And people like that somehow find out about our Father De La Salle. They come here and are transformed but it worries me that they exhaust him so much." Michael's expression registered his concern as much as his words.

"Well, he should send them to the parish priests who are supposed to deal with them and then our community wouldn't be disturbed and he'd be here on time for meals," interjected Louis, cutting through all problems and subtleties to emphasise the basic point at issue. "That's what priests get paid for. We don't get anything out of this."

Later, when De La Salle appeared to excuse himself for his absence and take some food, it was Louis who took it upon himself to remind the Founder of his obligations to the community timetable. When his exposé of the situation went unanswered he announced finally, to the embarrassment of the other Brothers, "You're really living on our charity now, you know. You should be able to put our affairs first. And I think you



are too cut off in that room of yours, always away there in quiet while we're working."

De La Salle smiled: "Brother Louis, what I prefer is to speak less, but with greater wisdom." But the hint was lost on the insensitive Louis.

Louis was not the only one who seemed unable to discern what pupils and criminals and many spiritual persons appreciated quickly. For a large number of important people his qualities seemed hidden behind an opaque veil; Brothers, parish priests, bishops and archbishops had all in various times and places turned

against him and frustrated his work. Even as he lay on his deathbed the archbishop of Rouen sent to tell him that his permission to hear confessions was suspended. De La Salle received the news calmly. For many years he had looked to God rather than men for his justification and many times he would have reflected on these words of the psalm and applied them to his life:

*This I know: that God is on my side ...  
In God I put my trust, fearing nothing;  
what can men do to me? (Ps. 56)*

## For prayer and reflection: 11

- *'It is not possible for many persons to live together without being a source of mutual suffering.'* Coming from a saint, that perception must be consoling for the rest of us. He continues:

*'It is rare that such varied dispositions, such different mentalities, do not lead to difficulties among Brothers, and if grace did not come to the rescue, it would be almost impossible for them to be mutually forbearing, and to avoid offending seriously against charity.'* (Med 74)

To summon God's grace to the rescue we should bring into our prayer someone whom we find difficult. We should talk to Jesus about them, about the things that irritate us, about the anger that builds up in us. Jesus met people like that as well so he can sympathise with our struggles. It is Jesus also who can give us the strength to forgive and that is a grace for which we need to ask, as it does not come automatically: he reminds us, *'if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours'*. (Matt 6:14)

- The other side of putting up with people is that on our own we are incomplete: we do not have all the resources and gifts which are required in life and we need to share our living with others. St. Paul spelled this out with his analogy of the body:

*'God put all the separate parts into the body on purpose. If all the parts were the same, how could it be a body? As it is, the parts are many but the body is one. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you', nor can the head say to the feet, 'I*

*do not need you .... Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it.'*

(1 Cor 12:18+)

Make a prayer of thanksgiving for some of the people in your life who help you with their gifts.

- De La Salle wrote that the union between people in religious community should resemble the union between the members of the Holy Trinity. God is a relationship of love. Created in his image we were made to share in that. How much are our relationships really based on love (not the same as liking) for others?
- Examine the way you pray to see what you pray about. Do other people figure here? Do you pray for those negative areas where you need to improve your life? Are there areas that you don't pray about, which you are reluctant to talk to Jesus about? In the parable of the man who badgers his friend into lending him food in the middle of the night, Jesus tells us how persistent we have to be in prayer. (Lk. 11: 5)
- *'If I were courting the favour of men I should not be what I am, the slave of Christ.'* (Gal 1:10)
- *"When you die, the Lord will not ask you how much you have done with your life, but how much love you have put into the doing."* (Mother Teresa)

*In 1679, on the doorstep of the Sisters of the Child Jesus in the rue du Barbâtre at Rheims. De La Salle met Adrien Nyel and a young assistant of his. Nyel had been sent to Rheims from Rouen in order to open a charity school for poor boys. De La Salle immediately involved himself in assisting Nyel's project, without having any idea where this first generous impulse would lead him.*

On that doorstep,  
 making first formal acquaintance with Adrien Nyel  
 was a brief significant moment in your life.  
 One can't hustle people into change or conversion,  
 it is more a matter of timing,  
 and God is an expert.  
 You were not aware until much later  
 of that wedge of vocation that the Lord  
 had tapped into the open gap of your goodwill.  
 Those first steps to help found schools in Rheims  
 led you into drawing-rooms and comfortable presbyteries  
 where, with skill and decorum, negotiations flowed.  
 Later, it was not all so smooth.  
 For the family council, the sort of person  
 you invited in was out,  
 and it was with real relief  
 they saw you cross that threshold  
 on the rue Neuve with 'your community'.

When the archbishop made you wait  
 outside, you knew that Jesus, too,  
 carried by his mother,  
 was refused suitable reception. You knew  
 that God also waits on door steps  
 awaiting an invitation — one that you  
 always tried to give.  
 And it is obvious to us  
 that God entered more and more  
 through that gradually opening door to your soul  
 just as you moved step by step  
 through the openings God showed,  
 one commitment leading to another.

God stands on the doorstep  
 with us, you would say,  
 and may come in with us, depending.  
 Today we don't spend much time waiting;  
 doors slide open automatically  
 revealing glitz designed to catch our eye  
 and fans wafting warming air to cosset us  
 (or cool-conditioning in hot and dusty lands)  
 so that we step forwards into security  
 and feel impressed by our reception.



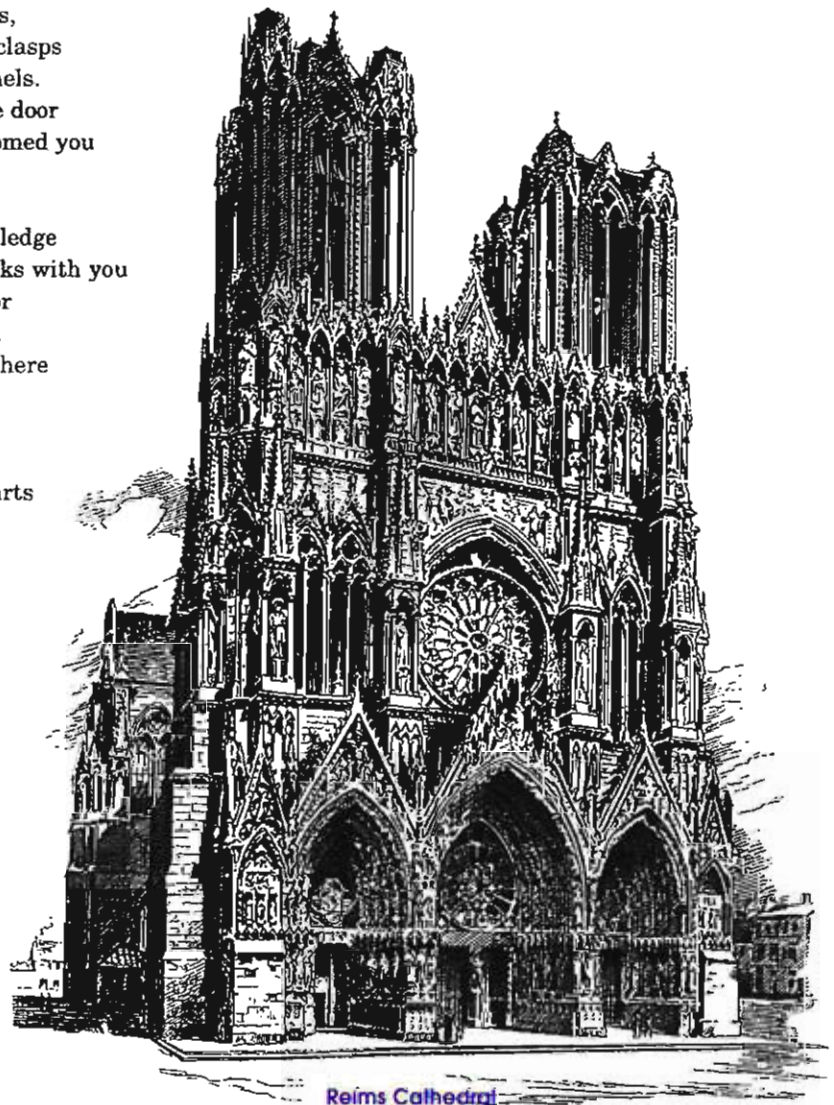




The angel of the smile:  
over the doorway of Reims Cathedral

What price Providence?  
Our flattered spending power obscures our vision:  
glass doors reflect distorted figures  
as much as shifting clouds.  
How can we see significance  
in unconsidered automatic movement asking nothing of us?  
Perhaps by trying  
those unfamiliar doors of challenge  
opening onto areas of distress  
and pain and desperation  
which can't be seen  
from brightly lit and neatly carpeted walkways.  
Are dimly lit and dirty alleyways and corridors  
places for us? Are there people there?  
Does your example give us courage  
to step through —  
as if we were to walk on water?

The arched doors are there in old prints,  
framed in stonework, metal studs and clasps  
stretching across to bind the heavy panels.  
They made you wait, they slammed the door  
or watched you beg, though some welcomed you  
to joy and fellowship. But each door  
is never the final one, each is a stage  
in the journey, a step into action, knowledge  
or self-abandonment. The God who walks with you  
smiles like the smiling angel at the door  
of Rheims cathedral where you started.  
A smiling God who calls you now elsewhere  
through doors that He will open.  
We are not sad that you have gone,  
but treasure what you left.  
Your life of service has touched our hearts  
and kept us thinking, deciding,  
paused always on that threshold  
inviting us deeper  
into the mystery and love of God.



Reims Cathedral

# Notes

## Bibliography

- Luke Salm FSC *The Work Is Yours* (1989, Christian Brothers Publications, Romeoville, Illinois.)  
A good, clear basic biography.
- W.J. Battersby FSC. *St. John Baptist de La Salle (1957)*  
Still an interesting and readable life of the saint with plenty of historical detail.
- Alfred Calcutt FSC *De La Salle: a city saint and the liberation of the poor through education*  
(1993. De La Salle Publications, Oxford.)  
A substantial read packed with detail and with wide-ranging references to source materials, biographies, etc.
- Carl Koch FSC *Praying with John Baptist de La Salle* (1990. St. Mary's Press, Christian Brothers Publications, Winona, Minnesota.)  
Contains a summary of the life and then uses De La Salle's life and writings for reflection and prayer.
- Edwin Bannon FSC *De La Salle: a Founder as Pilgrim* (1988. DLS Publications, Oxford.)  
A deep and illuminating examination of the life and spiritual journey of De La Salle.

References in the notes to each unit have mostly been restricted to the biographies by L. Salm and A. Calcutt. The latter life has references which make more detailed research easily possible.

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## Notes on the units

### 1. Departures

Salm: Chapters 1 & 2  
Calcutt: pp. 71–77

<sup>1</sup> Blessed Nicolas Roland: 1642–1678. Friend and mentor of De La Salle. Founded a teaching order, the Sisters of the Child Jesus, in Rheims. At his death he left De La Salle the task of securing official recognition for his fledgling Institute.

### 2. Out of the depths

Salm: p. 35  
Calcutt: pp. 137–138

### 3. New world

Salm: pp. 37–42.  
Calcutt: pp. 165–167

<sup>1</sup> The rue Neuve was the first community home of the Brothers. See Calcutt 149–50.

### 4. What is going on?

Salm: pp. 74–85  
Calcutt: pp. 239–254

<sup>1</sup> Fr. Leonard de Sainte Catherine. A late 17th. century chronicler who described De La Salle and Vaugirard life in his memoirs. See Calcutt pp. 251–52.

<sup>2</sup> Calcutt: pp. 265–266



## 5. All my life

Salm: pp. 80–85.  
Calcutt: pp. 254–258

## 6. Christian school. Bastille

Salm: pp. 58–63.  
Calcutt: pp. 217–221, 307–334. Schools.  
pp. 216 Bastille

## 7. The multitude of the poor

Salm: pp. 145–147  
Calcutt: pp. 485, 489–491. Famine  
pp. 435–439, 446–448. Education  
and the poor

## 8. Dangerous territory

Salm: pp. 150, 160–61  
Calcutt: pp. 510, 520–22.

<sup>1</sup> **The Edict of Nantes** This edict of 1598 gave the Protestants in France a measure of religious and political freedom. In 1685, Louis XIV revoked the edict. The new regulations stated that Protestants could not run their own schools and that all new-born children had to be baptised and brought up in the Catholic faith.

<sup>2</sup> **The Conduct of Schools** was one of De La Salle's great educational works composed in consultation with the Brothers after numerous years of school experience.

## 9. Trials

Salm: pp. 162–167  
Calcutt: pp. 530–536

<sup>1</sup> De La Salle, supported by other influential persons, had acceded to the request by the young Abbé Clément to open a training college for teachers. The Abbé would fund the project. Shortly after its opening the Clément family turned against De La Salle and pursued a

vindictive court action against him on the grounds that the Abbé was under 25 and technically a minor. The moral rights and wrongs of the case were not considered and De La Salle was condemned by the courts.

<sup>2</sup> **Jansenism** was a doctrinal tendency dealing with God's gift of grace which caused a great deal of dissension in France during the De La Salle's lifetime. He never supported the movement, which had many powerful sympathisers, and was consequently badly treated in some areas. The doctrine was finally condemned by the Pope in 1713

<sup>3</sup> Brother Timothy was the second Brother to become Superior General.

## 10. Parménie

Salm: pp. 167–172  
Calcutt: pp. 550–556

See also L. Burkhard and L. Salm. *Encounters: De La Salle at Parménie*

<sup>1</sup> Soeur Louise Hours, 1646–1727, A local girl who understood that God had given her the task of re-establishing a Christian centre at the ruins of an old monastery. She encountered opposition to her project from some ecclesiastics but eventually succeeded in founding a successful retreat centre. She had a great reputation for holiness and showed particular insight when counselling people.

## 11. Towards the end

Salm: pp. 186–190  
Calcutt: pp. 587–590

<sup>1</sup> *Meditation no. 64.* De La Salle could be quite direct when he wished to make a point, especially in the context of community life.

## 12. The door

Salm: pp. 31–33  
Calcutt: pp. 127–131

See also further references to Adrien Nyel.

## Notes on prayer

Prayer should not be a complicated activity but there are a few things to bear in mind to enable it to be effective.

Firstly, we are enabling God to get in touch with us in a more intimate way. That means that we have to open ourselves up to his work in us and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We have the opportunity of talking to God: we also have the duty of listening to his reply.

Secondly, we need to have some kind of framework for our prayer time. The following are some brief suggestions of elements we might use.

1. Time and space. We need to give quality time to God and we can't do that if we are preoccupied with what we are going to do next. We need to be quiet and relaxed so that we can distance the daily rush and concentrate our minds. Take time at the start of prayer just to settle down; relaxation or breathing techniques may help here.

Allow enough time to pray. Twenty minutes or more. Fixing a time stops us from jumping up and doing something we have just remembered should have been done yesterday. The inevitable distractions may be brought into the prayer and prayed about or they may be just pushed away and the mind returned to attention on God.

2. Make a conscious effort to recall that you are in God's presence. A suitable line of scripture might help with this:

e.g. *'The Spirit of God has made his home in you.'*  
(Rom.8:9)

*'The man who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives continually in me and I in him.'* (Jn 6:56)

3. The main body of one's prayer may use one or more of a variety of elements. For example:

- a). Read a text slowly and reflect on it or on particular phrases as you go.
- b). Examine your own life or convictions in the light of your reading.
- c). Speak directly to the Lord in conversational manner presenting to him your life, your joys, your problems.
- d). Repeat a short phrase as a mantra to centre your mind on God or Jesus:  
  
e.g. *'I am the light of the world.'* (Jn. 8.12)  
*'I am the vine, you are the branches.'* (Jn. 15.5)
- e). Listen to the Lord. Ask him what he wishes you to do. Note any thoughts which come to you.
- f). Examine your conscience on the day's activities or on your life recently.
- g). Pray for your needs and those of people you know.
- h). Aim to do something particular in the Lord's service at some precise opportunity in the near future. This could concern one's personal life or relations with others.
- i). End your prayer with a moment of thanks to the Lord for your time of prayer and for the blessings in your life.

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## Books on prayer

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|-----------------------------|--|
| Damian Lundy                | <i>To Grow in Christ</i> (Kevin Mayhew Publishers)   |
| Karl Koch                   | <i>Praying with John Baptist de La Salle</i> (St. Mary's Press, Winona, Minnesota.)  |
| Patricia Mary Vinje         | <i>Praying with Catherine of Sienna</i> (& the rest of the series)   |
| J. Bergman & Sr. M. Schwan. | <i>Love: A Guide For Prayer</i> (St. Mary's Press)   |
| Gerard W. Hughes            | <i>God of Surprises</i> (Darton Longman & Todd)  |
| Susan A. Muto               | <i>Meditation in Motion</i> (Doubleday, Image Books)   |
| Nicholas Hutchinson         | <i>Lord, Teach us to Pray</i> (Matthew James Publishing)<br><a href="http://www.prayingeachday.org">www.prayingeachday.org</a> |



